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Lee

The World and Delia

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE GIRL AND THE MAN
IRRESPONSIBLE KITTY
ALIX OF THE GLEN
OLIVE KINSELLA
DELPHINE
THE GIRL IN GREY
A FLIRTATION WITH TRUTH

**** For reviews of these novels see end of this volume*

LONDON: JOHN LONG, Publisher

The World and Delia

By

~~Curtis Yorke~~ Ps.
S. R. Lee

'Daughter,'—they seem to say, 'Peace to thy heart
We too, yes, daughter, have been as thou art—
Hope-lifted, doubt-depressed, seeing in part,
Tried, troubled, tempted, sustained, as thou art!'

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The World and Delia

Chapter I

A TERRIBLY serious matter was under discussion in a certain small house on the north side of Holland Park Avenue, on a hot sunny morning in June.

The matter in question was:

Ought Delia to be allowed to join the Pilgrim's Club, or ought she not?

Aunt Esther thought most decidedly not. Women's clubs had been unheard of in her young days, and Aunt Esther's mind was of a type so conservative as to be almost stationary. Aunt Sara, on the other hand (she was very particular about having her name spelt without the 'h'), was rather inclined to view the matter more leniently. She was some years younger than Aunt Esther, that is to say she had only just said good-bye to her seventieth birthday, and she was altogether of a less ponderous turn of mind. Indeed, in many ways Aunt Sara considered herself rather advanced. She had read one or two books that her sister would certainly not have approved of (had she known about them).

She had also seen the third act of a French play, having once strayed into the wrong theatre by mistake when someone had sent her a stall ticket for a mild domestic drama at a neighbouring play-house. She had not, it is true, understood a word of the piece in question; but she frequently spoke of it in a prim, reticent way that gave listeners the idea that, though she considered the author might have exercised a little more restraint, she thought the play decidedly powerful. Also, she had once had a few minutes' conversation with a lady who had seriously contemplated writing a book. Thus, it will be seen that Aunt Sara might fairly be considered an authority on most things.

'You know, Esther,' she said mildly, 'you have never visited a woman's club; so they may be harmless enough resorts, after all.'

'They may be,' replied her sister, who was given to would-be sarcastic speech delivered in a voice considerably below the middle register. 'So may the lower regions, for all I know personally to the contrary. If you, however, are acquainted with the interior of any woman's club, I was not aware of it, and bow to your superior knowledge of haunts which in our young days would certainly not have been considered reputable.'

'Esther! You know I have never been inside any club, male or female,' was the reproachful answer. 'Do I ever go anywhere without you?'

Here Delia herself entered the room, fresh and gay and smiling, though apologetic; for she was five minutes late for breakfast—a capital offence in her aunt's eyes.

Delia—she had been christened Cordelia about twenty years ago—was an altogether delightful little person to behold. She had an air of combined demureness and daintiness; her eyes were brown, and so was her unruly hair; and her face was small and creamily pale; but her lips were red, and had a naughty curve.

She kissed her aunts respectfully, and took a seat facing the window.

'We have been talking of you, child,' said Aunt Sara, when her niece had demolished a small egg, and disposed of a large cup of tea. 'I mean, we have been considering the advisability of your joining this—this unfortunate club. Your Aunt Esther seems to think it would be a risk——'

'Don't put words into my mouth, Sara, if you please,' interrupted Aunt Esther sharply. 'I said nothing about risk. I merely said I objected. And I do. Poor dear James's daughter is too like her mother, poor dear James's wife, to be let loose to gallivant about women's clubs, where, I understand, women smoke and swear and drink spirits and soda, and behave generally like men or savages.'

A cloud swept over Delia's bright little face.

'Oh, never mind,' she said, crumbling her toast impatiently, 'I don't care—much. Only somehow

there always is some objection whenever I want to do as other girls do.'

'We will make it up to you in some other way, dear,' Aunt Sara hastened to say consolingly. 'We might—don't you think so, Esther?—we might take the child to a matinée. We could choose something proper.'

Delia shrugged her shoulders. She would much rather have seen something improper. Perhaps so would Aunt Sara. Jane Hading was playing 'Sapho' at the Coronet that very afternoon. But, then, Aunt Esther thought all French plays sinful. And 'Sapho' would have frozen her with horror.

'It is only since the visit of that singular young person—I forget her name—that you have been desirous of joining this club,' said Aunt Esther, ignoring the matinée question. 'I think she is a most objectionable acquaintance for you, from my limited knowledge of her. I have seldom been more shocked at the sentiments of any young girl.'

Delia was silent. She knew by experience that argument with Aunt Esther was hopeless.

The girl's life was singularly empty of any of the manifold interests and excitements that shake up the lives of most young girls of to-day. She always felt as if she were in a cage. A comfortable, safe cage, doubtless. But the bars were of steel. And the door was always fastened.

She had literally no companions—that is to say, no companions of her own age.

The World and Delia

About a year ago, during a brief sojourn at Scarborough, where the aunts and herself had recruited from influenza for a fortnight, she had accidentally made the acquaintance of a congenial spirit, the 'singular young person' just alluded to by Aunt Esther. This young person had not found favour in the eyes of either of the aunts, who looked upon her as a fearful and wonderful product of a fast and godless age, and prayed fervently that 'poor, dear James's daughter' might never be like her.

Nevertheless, this firebrand (whose name was Fedora Crayshaw, usually known to her intimates as 'Minx') was dear to the heart of Delia, and the banning of her friendship was one of the few things in her aunt's iron rule that she resented bitterly. She was a contented little soul; but sometimes she wondered if all her life was to be like this life that seemed to satisfy her aunts so completely. It seemed impossible that they could ever have been young, ever have bubbled over with the sheer joy of being alive, ever have laughed, and danced, and flirted, as young girls do laugh, and dance, and flirt, all over the world.

Possibly there was not another young girl in all London who lived the monotonous, joyless existence that fate had seemingly dealt out to Delia Penfold.

As I have said, she was twenty years old. But in looks, ideas, and general physical and mental development, she was not much more advanced

than a twentieth century girl of sixteen or seventeen, if so much.

The friends of the elder Misses Penfold were all old and prim and proper like themselves. Dreadful evening tea-parties occurred in the little house in Holland Park Avenue—tea-parties where solemn old-fashioned games were played, and old-world songs were sung which most of my readers have either never heard of, or have well-nigh forgotten.

At these parties Delia was treated as though she were a very small child indeed. At which she hardly knew whether to laugh or cry.

On the afternoon after the conversation recorded above, the Misses Penfold went out to pay a long-since-due call, and Delia was left at home, much to her relief, to pursue the exhilarating occupation of hemming table-napkins. She took her work out into the tiny back-garden, and having established herself under a shady but sooty lime-tree, sewed and read alternately. And her book was an up-to-date novel which would have given her Aunt Esther fits if she had seen it.

A ginger-coloured cat, old and sedate, blinked and slumbered at her feet, and listened unmoved to the impatient exclamation with which she at last flung away both book and thimble.

'Oh, cat, cat!' she cried out, touching the somnolent animal with her foot. 'Do you never feel as if you wanted to do something more exciting than sleep all day? Do you never want to see the

world, cat, and have a rollicking good time like other cats, or even be a little wicked now and then ?'

The ginger-coloured cat stretched out first one paw and then another, and yawned. He had had his day. Many a time he had been the life of the party at friendly gatherings on the tiles, and many were the wild, nocturnal orgies in which he had taken part. But he had almost forgotten these gay times. All he asked now was rest and warmth, and plenty of congenial nourishment. And, having all this, he was prepared to dream away the remainder of his days in torpid content.

Delia dropped a half-hemmed table-napkin over him, rose to her feet, and stretched her arms lazily over her head.

As she did so, someone came down the shallow white steps that led from the window of the small drawing-room. Delia looked up with an exclamation of pleasure.

'Why, Minx !' she cried incredulously. 'What a joyful, splendid surprise !'

Minx—her real name was Fedora Crayshaw, as has been said—put out two smartly-gloved little hands, and exclaimed in a curiously sweet voice :

'Well, you poor, cooped-up darling, how are you ? I chanced to see your two old dragons of aunts careering solemnly down the road in calling array, so I skipped in on the chance of having a good old chat with you before they get back. I've

been to a matinée at the Coronet, and walked westward with a friend who lives in Royal Crescent. She's been an awful fool, and married a man with barely three hundred a year, simply because she's in love with him. Fancy life on three hundred a year! How peculiarly ghastly!'

'Oh, I don't know,' said Delia meditatively. 'I don't think the aunts have more than that.'

Miss Crayshaw spread out her hands expressively. She was a very pretty young woman, with enormous blue eyes and a quantity of reddish-gold hair.

'Oh, the aunts!' she echoed. 'But what enjoyment do they get out of life, will you tell me? Oh, my dear, patient, sat-upon, little Cinderella, how do you manage to bear your grey, crawling life as cheerily as you do? I should, in your place, have become a capering, gibbering idiot long ago.'

'I'm not so patient as you might think,' Delia answered gloomily. 'To-day, I'm in a state of seething, boiling rebellion. The decree has gone forth that I am not to join the Pilgrim Club.'

'Well, I'm not surprised,' her companion answered. 'To a couple of dear old back-numbers like your worthy aunts, a woman's club must be a kind of social Gehenna that no self-respecting female could consistently countenance. Never mind. When I'm married, I'll carry you off, aunts or no aunts, and give you at least a clear fortnight of real life before you die.'

'Are you going to be married?' exclaimed the

other, opening her eyes very wide. 'Why, Minx, I think you might have told me.'

'Going to be married? Of course I am. I'm not one of the stiff-necked geese who are bent on keeping themselves, and viewing men, in the aggregate, as monsters incarnate. A very little of that goes a very long way.'

'But who to?' inquired Delia grammarlessly.

'Oh, I don't know yet. I had two offers last week. But one was from a curate—fancy me a curate's bride!—and the other from a young man in the navy with nothing a year and expectations. No, thank you. I've never had more than a few shillings to call my own in all my life, so I mean to marry money—money with a capital "M," my dear. Of course, it goes without saying that the possessor of the money, and ultimately of me, must be decent to look at, and of tolerably good family. I have my eye on a man now who would just do.'

Delia's straight brows contracted in a frown.

'Really, Minx, if you were anybody else, you would be downright vulgar,' she said shortly.

'Yes, I know,' returned the other, rolling gleefully on the old garden-seat where she had carefuly placed herself. 'But I am me. And so there you are, you see.'

And she hummed in a monotonous undertone:

'Ich komme, ich weiss nicht woher;
Ich gehe, ich weiss nicht wohin;
Ich bin, ich weiss nicht was.
Mich wundert dass ich so frölich bin.'

'Dear, funny Delia,' she went on after a pause. 'Tell me what you do with yourself all day. Your proceedings must be weird, I'm sure.'

'Thank you, I have no desire to be laughed at,' was the sharp answer.

'Delia most dear, I don't feel in the least like laughing at you. I feel much more like crying at you. Your life seems such a waste. For you are very nearly pretty, you know, and awfully fetching. If you were ever allowed to see a man, they would all fall in love with you.'

'It's a good thing I never see any, then.'

'Well, anyway, tell me what you do in this grim old prison,' persisted the other.

'Well, I get up at seven. Then we have prayers. Then breakfast. Then I dust my room and the drawing-room, and help one of my aunts to make the beds.'

Minx made a face.

'I also wash up the breakfast china, and put it away. Then I go into the kitchen, and get a list from cook of the various marketings for the day.'

'Snakes!' interpolated Miss Crayshaw.

'Then Aunt Sara and I go out to do the marketing,' continued Delia, tilting her hat well over her small straight nose.

'But I thought tradesmen came to the door with carts,' put in Minx curiously.

'So they do, at some houses. But the aunts don't

approve of ordering things in that way. Then it is nearly dinner-time.'

'Dinner-time!' murmured Minx. 'Do you dine in the middle of the day?'

'We do. After dinner I read aloud to the aunts, and then practise on the piano for an hour. If it is fine I potter about the garden in the afternoon, or we all go for a walk in Kensington Gardens. If it is not fine, I sew. We have tea at six. After that I sew again; then play cribbage or bezique or whist with dummy until bedtime.'

'Oh, my heavens, what a life!' moaned Miss Crayshaw. 'And is that the programme day by day?'

'Yes. Except that sometimes, of course, we go out to tea, or have one or two people to tea here.'

'Delia!' exclaimed Minx solemnly, 'do you never feel as if you were going straight out of your mind?'

'No,' was the brief answer. 'I can't say I do.'

'What a life!' ejaculated the other. 'What a stagnation, rather. And do you never go away on a visit—never go out of London?'

'No. The aunts don't approve of gadding about. Sometimes we hire a carriage, and drive to Kew or Richmond; and once we went to Hampton Court.'

Minx leaned limply back in her seat.

'You poor darling! You martyr! You saint!' she said in a slow, impressive staccato. 'I never heard of anything so pathetic in all my life. It is hardly credible that such a state of things can exist

in the twentieth century. I could cheerfully boil your aunts in oil. What can they be thinking of ?'

Delia glanced at her watch nervously.

'I hope you won't be offended, Minx,' she said. 'But you know I told you that my aunts don't approve of my friendship with you. And they may be in at any minute, so——'

'So you would like me to depart,' was the airy answer. 'Well, my dear, I'm not nearly ready to go yet, and, if the old ladies do come in before I leave, I shall take the liberty of giving them a generous piece of my mind. You poor, tied-up-in-a-bag Delia, have you any idea of the crowds of things I squeeze into nearly every day of my life ? And yet I don't consider I have a quarter such a good time as hundreds of other girls.'

'I suppose you go to a party every second night or so ?' sighed Delia wistfully.

'A party every second night ?' echoed the other in derision. 'Why, my dear, listen to a sketch of what I did yesterday, for example. I got up at eight, had breakfast, read and answered my letters, and discussed some new frocks with the mater. Then motored down to my dressmaker, and had some things tried on, then did some shopping, scrambled home and dressed to go out to lunch. Then flew into a picture gallery to see some frightful daubs by an artist the mater's interested in, looked in at two bore-you-stiff musical "At Homes," rushed home and dressed to dine with the Somersets,

and go to the Garrick afterwards. Then went on to a dance in Grosvenor Street, and subsequently played bridge at the Stanley-Whiffles' until three this morning. The day before, I spent the morning at the Bath Club. Then we had people to lunch, then went to a concert, and looked in at a charity bazaar, then on to a garden party. Dined at the Savoy, and saw the second act (the only one worth seeing) of Bertie Canning's new play. Then on to two evening receptions, and finished up with bridge at the Tauntons', where I won twenty-five pounds, which just paid a bill that has been worrying my soul for over a year. And I don't call these specially rushing days, either.'

'Good gracious!' exclaimed Delia, 'I wonder you are alive.'

'Little silly, it is just such mild dissipations that keep me alive,' answered the other with a yawn. 'If I lived your life I should be worse than dead; I should be a dangerous lunatic. By the way, do you remember Maria Jeffreson, the girl I was staying with—her people, at least—at Scarborough? Well, she has just made the most splendid marriage. A foreign prince, rolling in money—a fearful old crow to look at, but that's nothing. Some people have luck, haven't they? I wish him joy, though. He doesn't know what he has let himself in for. I never was fond of Maria, though we have been companions since babyhood. She has the innocent, taking ways of a kitten and the morals of a cat.

He'll either divorce her or murder her before six months, you'll see.'

'Minx, what appalling things you do say! I rather liked that girl, the little I saw of her.'

'Of course you did. You couldn't see through her.'

'Do you know,' said Delia slowly, after a pause, 'I don't think I ever once heard you say a nice thing about any woman.'

'Ah, you never heard me speak of you, then. But I don't mind acknowledging that I'm not specially gone on our sex. They're nearly all cats, and not to be trusted any further than they can be seen. Don't you remember what some old Greek philosopher said: "Only one thing I believe of a woman, that she will not come to life again after she is dead." No, give me men. They are at least straight, whether they are good or bad.'

'How can they be straight if they are bad?' said Delia whimsically. 'I should say they were crooked.'

'Ah well, you know what I mean. I say, Delia, do you think the aunts would let you come to Sunningdale with dad and me for the week end? We're going to motor down the day after to-morrow —Friday.'

'No, I'm sure they wouldn't,' the other answered with a doleful shake of her head. 'They have a horror of motors, especially since Aunt Sara was nearly run over the other day at Notting Hill Gate.'

'So! Well, I must depart,' said Minx, gathering up her filmy skirts. 'We have some people dining to-night, and the mater wants me to see to the flowers. Gibbons is inartistic, she says.'

Delia went through the drawing-room and the little hall with her to the front door. The late afternoon post had come, and two letters lay on the hall table.

'None for me, of course,' said Delia. 'One long, thin one for Aunt Sara, and a square one for Aunt Esther. What a nice hand. Who can it be from?'

'From a man, evidently,' observed Minx, examining the envelope with a critical eye. 'I like the hand. Good paper, too, and a crest. Depend upon it, it's from some old sweetheart. And yet I don't know. I can't imagine either of your aunts ever having had a sweetheart. I expect they'd think it improper. For, you know, they are really prudish to the verge of indecency. Well, good-bye, my chick. You'll hear from me soon.'

Chapter II

DELIA watched Aunt Esther curiously as she opened and read the letter whose caligraphy Minx had approved. For the old lady was visibly excited.

'My dear Sara, it is from Donald Carstairs,' she exclaimed. 'You remember him, of course? Poor fellow! He made rather a mess of his marriage, and his wife died, you know, about six years ago, when his youngest child was a mere infant. He suggests coming to call upon us.'

'Dear Donald, what a nice boy he was!' said Aunt Sara, sighing sentimentally. 'And now—why, he must be forty.'

Delia's interest in her aunt's correspondent died swiftly.

To her twenty years forty seemed very far ahead on life's highway.

'He thinks of coming to-morrow afternoon, unless he hears from us to the contrary,' went on Aunt Esther. 'I don't know of anything to prevent. Do you, Sara?'

'No; except that it is Jane's day out. But I dare say she would be willing to stay in for once. Dear

me, we must take the covers off the drawing-room chairs, and get out the best china. I dare say he will be here about four or half-past.'

Delia smiled somewhat superciliously as she listened to this flurried conversation. What a fuss to make about a man of forty, she said to herself with a covert smile.

All next day the sisters were very busy taking the chintz covers off chairs and couches, superintending the dusting and arranging of the best tea-china, and inspecting their own somewhat old-fashioned gowns. For it appeared that Mr. Carstairs belonged to a period of their lives when they had been much better off, and had lived in a house that would have held at least four of 760, Holland Park Avenue.

After the mid-day dinner the sisters walked to Notting Hill Gate to see an old servant who was bedridden, and looked forward to the Misses Penfold's weekly visit as one of her few luxuries.

'We shall be home by half-past three at the very latest,' said Aunt Esther, as she unfurled her sunshade on the doorstep. 'You can finish the marking of those pocket-handkerchiefs, Delia. You need not come down until after tea, by the way. Mr. Carstairs will doubtless have much to say to us regarding his bereavement, and recollections of old days when things were very different with your aunt and me.'

Delia smiled, and made a naughty little face. She had no desire to see this elderly relic of the

past. She had a new book from the library, a love-story by the most popular author of the day, and she meant to spend a luxurious afternoon in the garden.

Thither she repaired, accordingly, after having—as a salve to her conscience—marked three pocket-handkerchiefs.

About three o'clock the door-bell rang loudly, and presently the trim little housemaid came out and said in a flurried voice:

'A gentleman to see your aunts, miss—Mr. Carstairs.'

Delia laid down her book.

'Where is he, Jane?'

'In the drawing-room, miss.'

'Ask him to come out here,' said Delia, seized by a sudden spirit of revolt. 'And Jane, bring another chair, please.'

'Another chair, miss?' echoed Jane, looking respectful astonishment.

'I said another chair, Jane,' was the calm answer.

The chair was brought; and the visitor followed.

Delia, as she shook hands, found herself regarding him with distinct surprise. Surely the aunts must have been mistaken when they said he was forty. He certainly had not the appearance of a man of forty. He was decidedly good to look at, too; tall, square-shouldered, and well-built; and his face, if not strictly handsome, was strong and kind. But there was a certain tired indifference about

him, a listlessness in his otherwise pleasant voice, that stirred the girl's heart to vague pity. Doubtless his wife had been his idol, and, alas! poor fellow, he had lost her. So ran the innocent thoughts of Delia, her mind filled with romantic stories of never-dying love.

What Donald Carstairs saw was a not unattractive-looking young girl, in a holland gown decidedly too short for her. Her big, solemn eyes —rather like those of a two-year-old baby—were fastened upon him with such unfeigned interest that he smiled unreservedly as he took her shyly-extended hand.

'My aunts are out,' she said, with a fine healthy blush. 'They did not expect you so soon.'

Then, conscious that she had said the wrong thing, she amended hastily:

'I mean, they expected to be in sooner.'

'I am early, I am afraid,' said Mr. Carstairs. Then he added: 'You are a niece of the Misses Penfold, then?'

'Yes,' she answered. 'I am Delia.'

'Delia?' he repeated. 'It is a pretty name, and uncommon, too.'

'Do you think so?' was the doubtful answer. 'I don't. I hate it. It sounds so sentimental, like one of the poems in the red silk "keepsakes" in the drawing-room. It makes me feel as if I were a hundred years old.'

'And are you a great age?' he asked gravely.

'I am twenty,' she said. Then she added: 'But you are forty, are you not?'

'Yes,' he answered. 'I'm afraid I am. But how did you know?'

'I heard my aunts speaking of you,' she said in a composed little voice. 'They remember you when you were a small boy. Just fancy!'

'Does the thought of my once having been a small boy seem very odd to you?' he asked with a faint smile. 'I confess it does to me.'

'Oh no, no,' she hastened to answer. 'You don't look nearly so old as I thought you would. I fancied you quite different.'

'Yes? What kind of mental picture did you draw of me?'

'Oh, I hardly know. I fancied you would be quite elderly, that you would have a beard, and that your hair would be grey. It is a little grey, of course, but not very. Oh, and altogether you are quite different.'

Few men—or women either—are insensible to the flattery, intentional or unintentional, that tells them they look younger than they are. Heaven knows why. We pay dearly enough for the experience our years bring us. Why should we be ashamed of these fruitful and hard-won years?'

Carstairs, therefore, unconsciously unbent to this frank and friendly young person, and settled himself more comfortably in his chair.

'So you see I am exactly twice your age,' he said.

'Just now you are,' she answered. 'But you won't always be. When I am thirty you won't be sixty.'

'No. But I shall always remain twenty years your senior. Why, I have a daughter only five years younger than you are.'

She was looking at him with grave steady eyes like a child's.

'Have you many children?' she asked.

'I have four,' he answered.

'How funny!' she said, with a sudden bubbling-over of laughter.

'Funny! Why?' he asked, not unnaturally.

'I don't know. Somehow you don't look like anybody's father.'

'No? What are fathers supposed to look like?' he asked, with an amused twinkle in his grave eyes.

'Oh, they usually look just like fathers—uninteresting, and pompous, and severe, and all that.'

'I'm afraid your experience of fathers is both limited and unfortunate,' he said.

'I dare say,' she answered, with a sudden relapse into gloom.

'I wish you were my father,' she added suddenly. 'I like you. I like your voice, and your eyes, and the way your hair grows.'

'You poor little thing!' he said, with a note of

compassion in his deep voice. 'Aren't the aunts good to you, then ?'

'Oh yes, they're good enough,' she said. 'But it's the kind of goodness that strangles and chokes you. If you were dying of cold, and someone wrapped you up so tightly in blankets that you couldn't breathe, you wouldn't like it, would you ?'

'No,' he agreed. 'To be stifled with kindness is almost as bad as being left to die of neglect. Almost —not quite. And I know your aunts of old. They are dear old souls, though.'

And at this juncture the aunts themselves appeared.

'Oh, my dear Mr. Carstairs,' exclaimed Aunt Esther, 'we are so very sorry. We were unavoidably detained. By mistake we got into a motor-omnibus, and a fire occurred. Of course, with the rest of the passengers, we hastily left the vehicle. But we were very much upset, and had to rest in a baker's shop for a considerable period. I trust you will forgive our seeming discourtesy.'

Neither aunt took any notice of Delia. And by this she knew that she was in disgrace—having entertained a strange man without her aunts' leave or chaperonage. But she did not care. She meant to have tea downstairs, instead of in her room, as previously decreed, and she took no notice of the old ladies' hints that they would not detain her any longer.

At last Miss Penfold said severely :

'You can go to your room, Delia. I dare say you have several things to see to.'

'No, thank you, aunt,' was the cheerful answer. 'I have marked some handkerchiefs, and done all the other things you told me.'

'My dear,' said Aunt Esther, in a peculiarly awful and stately voice, 'we have various matters to talk over with Mr. Carstairs. So take your work and go to your room, if you please.'

With downcast eyes Delia obeyed.

'What a charming little girl,' said Carstairs, as the slim young figure vanished up the steps into the house.

Aunt Esther sighed, as she preceded her guest and her sister into the drawing-room.

'She is poor James's daughter,' said Aunt Sara, shaking her head deprecatingly. 'You know, of course, that poor James married a young Irish-woman barely out of the nursery?'

Carstairs did not know. But he professed himself interested, as indeed he was. While Aunt Esther went upstairs to remove her bonnet and mantle, her sister explained the ins and outs of 'poor James's' marriage. When Miss Penfold returned with smooth, waveless hair and tiny lace cap, Aunt Sara retired to make a similar toilette. They were singularly unlike one another, by the way, these two sisters. The elder was tall, dark, with beautiful dark eyes, and thick black hair, with hardly a streak of grey, in spite of her seventy-five years. Her

sister was small, though erect; and her eyes were pale blue, while her almost white hair curled and waved naturally all over her head.

Carstairs remained for quite three-quarters of an hour after he had finished tea. As a matter of fact, he rather wanted to see the 'charming little girl' again. But she remained invisible; and her aunts did not send for her, being offended by what they considered her 'forwardness' in the garden.

Before the guest took his departure his hostesses invited him to spend the next evening but one with them.

'We do not entertain now,' said Aunt Esther, with the air of one who had been accustomed to extend hospitality to royalty. 'We cannot afford it. But occasionally we have a small informal gathering of half a dozen friends. If you will join us, as you say you are to be a week longer in town, it will give us very great pleasure, both for your father's sake and your own.'

'I shall be delighted,' he said.

When he had gone the sisters almost regretted their invitation.

'I fear he will find us very dull,' said Aunt Esther. 'He is doubtless accustomed to more modern entertainments than we can offer.'

'Oh well, it can't be helped,' chirped Aunt Sara. 'Besides, he said he had lived almost like a hermit since his wife's death. So perhaps he will find us quite gay.'

Chapter III

For the next couple of days the Misses Penfold were in a simmering state of excitement.

'You know, my dear,' Aunt Sara confided to Delia, as the latter assisted in the rubbing up of the 'best silver' on the day of the informal gathering, 'we have a melancholy interest in Mr. Carstairs, besides that which we naturally feel because of our old friendship for his father. As a matter of fact,' she continued, lowering her voice, 'Donald Carstairs was at one time an aspirant for the hand of our dear young half-sister Sophronia, who, as you know, died twenty years ago, when she was barely eighteen. She was a lovely girl.'

'Were they engaged?' asked Delia curiously.

'Oh no, my dear. In fact, he never really *said* anything. He was little more than a boy—about twenty, he must have been. But he used to come to the house constantly when we lived in dear Lennislands. And as your Aunt Esther and I were considerably—ahem!—his seniors, of course we knew it must be dear Sophronia.'

'But it might not have been any of you,' suggested Delia bluntly.

'Oh yes, my dear. Young men in those days did not visit maiden ladies for nothing. Besides, he paid her very marked attention—sent her music and boxes of sweets, and once, when he met her in the woods, walked all the way home with her. She was very young, of course, only sixteen, but we knew what it all meant. And yet,' the old lady went on meditatively, as she exhumed a silver cake-basket from a chamois-leather bag, 'curiously enough, barely a year after her death he married a young woman in every way unworthy of him.'

'How?' inquired Delia, who liked to get at the root of matters. 'Wasn't she a lady?'

'Why, my dear, of course she was a lady. Donald Carstairs is not the man to marry a person of low origin. Indeed, she was of very good family; but in no way a suitable wife for him in many things.'

'What things?' asked Delia.

'Well, in the first place, she had no more idea of housekeeping than—than your poor mother had. And she had no fixed principles on the bringing up of children.'

'Perhaps she didn't want to have any,' said the girl thoughtfully.

'My dear,' was the severe answer. 'I do not think it likely that she had any wishes in the matter. Well brought up young women leave these things in higher hands.'

'What did she die of?' asked Delia, after a silence.

A faint colour stained Aunt Sara's delicate cheeks.

'Well, it is hardly a subject to discuss with a young girl,' she said in a hesitating voice. 'But as a matter of fact she died in bringing a baby-girl into the world.'

'Why is it not to be discussed?' remonstrated Delia, who had no patience with her aunt's prudish ways. 'It is a very usual way of dying, it seems to me. Jane's sister died when her baby was born, and that poor woman who used to bring butter and eggs——'

'My dear, we will drop the subject, if you please,' interrupted her aunt gravely.

Then in a different tone she added:

'Your Aunt Esther and I are so afraid Mr. Carstairs may find our little gathering dull. I could almost wish we knew how the young men of to-day expect to be entertained.'

'But Mr. Carstairs isn't a young man,' said Delia, with all the arrogance of youth. 'He is forty. I should think cards and whisky-and-soda would make him happy enough.'

'Cards?' echoed Aunt Sara, brightening. 'Yes, of course. A game at whist is always cheerful. You had better get out the counters, my dear.'

'But I dare say he will want to play for money,' said Delia, smiling naughtily. 'And very few

people, so I have heard, play anything but bridge nowadays.'

'Bridge!' exclaimed her aunt in a horrified voice. 'Oh, my dear, your Aunt Esther would not allow the game within her doors. You must remember how dear Mr. Leyland preached against it from the pulpit only a few Sundays ago.'

The evening proved to be wet and chilly. And Carstairs arrived in a perfect deluge—and a hansom. Only two other guests braved the elements. One was a small and dried up professor of languages, who was devoting his obviously few remaining years to the collection of used postage stamps. The other was an elderly widow, stone deaf, and with a mournful, stereotyped smile.

Delia, in a severely simple gown of white muslin, such as her aunts deemed suitable for the 'young person,' sat demurely in a corner, with some trifle of fancy work. The evening seemed to her even duller than usual.

Mr. Carstairs was not, apparently, a brilliant conversationalist. The professor could only talk on the one subject of his hobby. Mrs. Freeman (the elderly widow I have mentioned) rarely spoke at all, except to say, 'How do you do?' and 'Good-bye.' The Misses Penfold were nervous and flurried at the non-appearance of their more important guests—on this evening, of all evenings. And our little Delia, at these gatherings, was not supposed to speak at all unless she had been previously spoken to.

Therefore the conversation kept lapsing into embarrassing silences.

At last Aunt Esther commanded her niece to give them 'a little music.'

The girl went to the piano reluctantly. For she was nothing of a musician, and to-night she felt painfully aware of the fact. Especially when Mr. Carstairs came and offered to turn over her music for her. She stumbled through one or two of her aunt's favourite 'pieces' in a halting, haphazard style that made her cheek burn with the sense of her own inefficiency, and at last stopped short, in sheer disgust at the miserable exhibition she felt she was making of herself.

'Thank you, thank you, my dear,' said the old professor placidly.

He did not know one note from another, and music, good or bad, was to him merely a soothing noise. The aunts, too, who had been nodding their heads to the piano's rhythm, went on with their high-pitched conversation with Mr. Freeman, only stopping to say in absent tones, 'Very nice, very pretty,' to the crimson performer.

The latter looked up defiantly into Donald Cartsairs' eyes as he stood by the piano.

'I know I don't play well,' she said, compressing her red lips in don't-care fashion.

'No,' was the quiet and perhaps unexpected answer. 'But why don't you? You haven't a bad touch.'

'Oh, I don't know. I hate music. Don't you?'

'On the contrary—it is a great enjoyment to me,' he replied.

'Good music, you mean,' she said crossly.

'If it is bad, it is not music,' he answered, smiling a little.

'I suppose your children play beautifully?' she went on, with a mutinous uplifting of her chin.

'If they do I have never heard them,' he said, his face becoming grave again.

After a pause, he added:

'As you hate music, I suppose you wouldn't care to come to a concert with me?'

'With you?' she repeated, her cheeks pinkening slightly. 'Why, the aunts would never let me.'

'If you care to go, I will manage the aunts,' he said.

'Why do you want to take me?' she asked, frowning a little. 'I shan't do you any credit, you may be sure. My clothes are all dowdy—as dowdy as this horrible frock I have on.'

Most men, perhaps, would have paid some airy compliment regarding the subservience of the frock to the wearer. But Donald Carstairs was not given to compliments. So he only said:

'I don't suppose anyone will notice your dress. I go to concerts for the sake of the music, you funny little girl, not to study the clothes of the audience. I should like you to come if it would not bore you. If it would, don't hesitate to say so.'

'Oh, I don't hesitate about saying things, as a rule,' she answered. 'It is one of my faults, Aunt Esther says. When you know me better you will find that out.'

'I hope I shall know you better some day,' he replied, with his grave smile. 'Meanwhile, what about the concert?'

She hesitated.

'Couldn't you take me to a play instead?' she said half coaxingly.

To her his forty years seemed to put him in the position of a possible uncle or elderly cousin.

'To a play,' she went on, 'that—that might, perhaps, be not exactly improper, but very nearly.'

He raised his eyebrows.

'My dear child, what an—er—unusual suggestion. What do you suppose your aunts would say to me?'

'But we needn't tell them,' was the frank answer. 'You can say you are going to take me to a theatre. And you need not be quite sure what theatre until we get there.'

'I'm afraid that would hardly do,' he said, feeling secretly amused. 'Besides, I really, at this moment, can't recall what questionable plays are running—if any.'

'Jane Hading is playing "Sapho" at the Coronet,' she sighed. 'I do so want to see it.'

'Ah! I am very certain that your aunts would not consider "Sapho" a play for young ladies,' he said drily. 'Nor should I.'

Here Aunt Esther's voice said with a faint accent of displeasure :

'Delia, if you have finished playing, you had better close the piano.'

The girl hurriedly obeyed, and retired to her corner.

A game of whist was then organized, while Aunt Sara went out of the room to see that the not-to-be-relied-upon Jane was not playing tricks with the carefully-laid supper-table.

Her return to the room again was the signal for Delia to retire to bed.

Next morning, when breakfast was nearly over, Aunt Esther said somewhat stiffly :

'Mr. Carstairs has kindly offered to take you to a concert in the Steinway Hall to-morrow afternoon, Delia. I must say I think it a little strange that he should invite you in preference to your Aunt Sara or myself. But manners have changed, I suppose, like other things, since I was young.'

'But you know, dear Esther,' put in Sara the peacemaker, 'Mr. Carstairs mentioned that he only had one ticket besides his own, and that he had promised the giver of the tickets that he would be present personally. And I dare say he did not like to give the preference to either of us, to the exclusion of the other.'

'Well, well, perhaps,' was the mollified answer. 'However, the question is—Will it be proper for Delia to go with him alone ?'

'Oh, auntie,' exclaimed Delia, with a spasm of

laughter, 'can you imagine anything improper connected with the Steinway Hall?'

'Your aunt was not speaking of the quality of the entertainment, my dear,' put in Aunt Sara, 'but of the circumstance of your going alone with a gentleman who is not related to you in any way.'

'I don't specially want to go,' said Delia, truthfully enough. 'I don't care for concerts; and my hat and frock are fearfully old-fashioned. I had as soon, indeed, rather stay at home.'

'It is hardly a question for you to decide, my dear,' snapped Aunt Esther the despot. 'If your aunt and I decide that it is right for you to go, I shall expect you to do so. It was kind of Mr. Carstairs to think of you, and, after all, he is old enough to be your father, and has a family.'

'Would it have made any difference if he hadn't had a family?' inquired Delia, fixing her big eyes on her eldest aunt.

'My dear, don't get into the habit of bandying words,' was the severe answer. 'Since your acquaintanceship with that Miss Crayshaw you have at times been sadly wanting in respect, I regret to say.'

Delia said nothing. She was accustomed to being treated as a little girl, and did not often resent it. And, indeed, it would have been of little use if she had. Miss Penfold was a born autocrat. And even Aunt Sara at times meekly allowed herself to be scolded, corrected, and held up to scorn, as the domestic tyrant decreed.

Chapter IV

DURING the forenoon Aunt Esther wrote a prim note to Donald Carstairs, thanking him for his kind invitation to her niece, 'which she would be very pleased to accept.' And by return of post a note was received from Carstairs, saying he would call for Delia on the following afternoon at a quarter past two.

Delia was not looking forward to the proposed entertainment with any appreciable pleasure. She really did not care for music, and she thought it rather unkind of Carstairs to persist in the concert, when she had so distinctly suggested a theatre. Evidently, she reflected, he was just as prudish and narrow-minded, in his way, as her aunts in theirs.

Nevertheless, as he rattled up to the door a few minutes before the hour appointed, in a smart and satisfactorily-horsed hansom, an unwilling shoot of admiration took root in her mind. He was certainly very nice-looking, this recalcitrant lover of dead and gone Aunt Sophronia. Not handsome—no, decidedly not. But what female novelists are fond of calling 'distinguished looking.' And

really, she told herself, he hardly looked elderly at all.

It is useless to deny that Delia's get-up was dowdy. It was not her fault, poor child. She wore the clothes her aunts provided for her—the clothes they thought suitable to her age. She had no voice in the matter. She never had. Nevertheless, she looked very sweet and lovable that afternoon. For she had the ineffable freshness of youth, and her charm was not at all dependent on dress, but rather on mood and surroundings. Her eyes were sparkling, and her cheeks were of a delicate pink born of excitement. For, after all, she told herself, the concert would only last for an hour or so, and, meanwhile, there was the drive in the swift hansom with an extremely well-set-up and personable man. And—will it be believed ?—Delia had never before driven in a hansom.

The aunts demurred when they saw the vehicle. Omnibuses or dismal four-wheelers were their only favoured modes of conveyance, nowadays, and Aunt Esther rather bewildered Carstairs by asking, in all seriousness, if he thought 'it was quite safe.' He assured her gravely that he thought it was.

'What a very pretty horse,' cred Delia, as they bowled swiftly along towards Notting Hill Gate. 'Tell the man to make him go faster. Oh, please do!'

'He is going quite fast enough,' was the calm answer. 'There's no particular hurry.'

Delia looked at the speaker half curiously, half resentfully.

'I suppose you always take your own way,' she said, 'whether other people like it or not?'

'Generally I do,' was the tranquil answer. 'I rather fancy that is your line too, if you get the chance, isn't it?'

'I rarely do get the chance,' she replied, with a resigned little shrug of her shoulders.

'No? Well, you shall have the chance to-day, in one small detail, at least.'

As he spoke, he pushed up the trap-door with his stick.

'Drive faster,' he said, 'drive as fast as you can.'

'All right, sir,' was the gruff answer from above.

And a cruel cut of the whip made the startled horse spring forward, and strain every muscle to amend his pace. But at the second cut Delia called out excitedly:

'Ah, no, no—please don't let him!'

With a faint smile Carstairs pushed up the trap-door.

'Not so fast,' he said. 'After all we have plenty of time.'

Then he added, letting his eyes meet Delia's:

'So tired of your own way already?'

She made no answer, and the rest of the drive was almost in silence, with the exception of a few

questions from Delia, and a few brief answers from her companion.

For Carstairs was unaccustomed to the society of young women, and was not quite sure what to say to them.

Contrary to her expectations, Delia rather enjoyed the concert. Possibly, as she admitted to herself, her supposed distaste for music might be because she had never heard any worthy of the name.

When it was over, Carstairs suggested that they should go and have tea somewhere; and his companion gleefully acquiesced. So another hansom conveyed them to the nearest Fullers', and Delia revelled in not only tea, but sweets and cakes and ices, to her heart's content.

'This is really splendid,' she said at last, with a long sigh of satisfaction. 'I don't think I ever spent such a lovely afternoon.'

'You extraordinary child,' he answered, looking across the little table with some amusement at her dimpling cheeks and shining eyes, 'have the aunts kept you on such very short commons of happiness?'

Then, quite inconsequently, it flashed into his mind that it might be rather interesting to initiate this young thing into a few of the gaieties and pleasures with which most London girls of her age are already almost satiated. But he pulled himself up sharply, and mentally anathematized himself as a fool.

'You mustn't think that the aunts aren't kind

to me,' Delia was saying, balancing her spoon carefully on the edge of her teacup. 'Because they are; and I'm sure they love me dearly. But, as Minx Crayshaw says, their minds are Early Victorian, and they don't understand. The things I most want to do would seem to them awfully improper.'

'Who is Minx Crayshaw?' he asked. 'She has a very unusual Christian name.'

'It isn't her name,' Delia answered. 'Her name is Fedora, but she has always been called Minx. I got to know her one year at Scarborough, and every now and then she comes to see me. But the aunts don't like her, so we really see very little of each other. She is the only girl friend I have.'

'What kind of things are you so anxious to do?' he said, after a pause. 'The things, I mean, that your aunts would think so improper. Would they seem awfully improper to me too, do you think?'

'No,' she answered, with a frank, swift glance at his dark, quiet eyes. 'I don't think so. I think you would understand.'

'Give me the chance, then. Tell me.'

'Well,' she said slowly 'I have always thought I should like to travel all over the world with a really interesting companion, who would know all about everything and everywhere. . I should prefer the companion to be a man; because, from all I have heard and read, men always know more about things than women, and they don't mind explaining.'

'But there would be nothing strikingly improper

in that,' he answered. 'The man would be your husband, I presume.'

She glanced at him witheringly.

'Why, you are as bad as the aunts,' she exclaimed. 'Of course the man wouldn't be my husband, or my lover, or—or anything like that. He would just be a companion—a chum.'

Carstairs carefully controlled his eyebrows.

'But I'm afraid people in general, as well as the aunts, would think that exceedingly improper,' he said unemotionally.

'Yes, I know,' was the lofty answer. 'But I don't see why they should. Do you?'

'I certainly think it would be hardly a desirable arrangement,' he observed, 'unless the male companion you allude to were old enough to be your grandfather. And even then——'

'Old enough to be my grandfather?' she interrupted him. 'But he wouldn't be. He would be just about my own age, or perhaps a few years older.'

'Oh,' was the somewhat dry answer.

'Why do you speak in that tone?' she asked crossly. 'Do you mean that you think I should be silly enough to fall in love with him?'

'I am not aware that I used any particular tone,' he replied. 'But I was not thinking so much of the possibility of your falling in love with him as of the probability of his falling in love with you.'

'Oh, he wouldn't be that kind of man,' she said, with slightly uplifted head.

'No? What kind of young man is it, do you think, who can take indefinitely prolonged tours with not altogether unattractive young women, and feel strictly Platonic?'

'Oh, I don't know,' was the huffy answer.

'No, neither do I,' he said. 'You are talking nonsense, little girl. Don't you know that?'

'Of course I don't mean that I should do it,' she went on impatiently. 'I know very well that it would be unusual. But I only say I should like to do it, and that I don't see why people shouldn't.'

Just for the moment she was looking extraordinarily pretty (though she was, strictly speaking, far from being a beauty), and Carstairs, in spite of the twenty years that lay between them, was beset by a sudden insane desire to whisk her off on the proposed unconventional tour, with himself as the well-informed and intelligent masculine escort. He choked off this absurd fancy, however, and suggested that it was time to make a movement homewards.

'Are we going in another hansom?' the girl said in a delightful crescendo, as they stood on the pavement, while Carstairs hailed a passing cab.

He laughed.

'I suppose so,' he said. 'Unless you would prefer a four-wheeler or an omnibus?'

'Rather not!' she answered decidedly.

When they were seated behind a gay and frisky chestnut, she said:

'You must be rather well off, I think?'

'Why do you think so? Because I can indulge in more than one hansom a day?'

'No, not exactly that. But—oh, for several reasons. But are you?'

'Do you think that is a very polite question for so well-brought-up a young woman?' he asked quizzically.

'No, I don't suppose it is,' she admitted, after a moment's thought. 'But it just came into my head.'

'And do you always say just what comes into your head?'

'No, not always. Only if I am with anyone really nice and easy to get on with.'

'Ah,' he said, 'you consider me, then, really nice and easy to get on with?'

She looked at him squarely with straightforward, childlike eyes.

'Yes, I do,' she answered seriously. 'Don't you remember I told you I should like to have you for a father?'

As she spoke she put her hand impulsively into his.

'I'm glad I've got to know you,' she said, with a contented little sigh. 'I'm rather a lonely person, you know, though the aunts are so kind.'

He held her hand lightly for a moment, then let it go. Twenty years lay between them, he reminded himself insistently. Twenty years. It was about ten years too much. Again he switched his thoughts round violently.

'But,' he said, in a carefully-controlled voice, 'you have only told me one of the things you would like to do—the things that would so surely shock the aunts, I mean.'

'Yes, I know,' she answered, her eyes fixed on the horse's twitching ears. 'One of the other things would be to have a tiny little flat in the very heart of London, and live all by myself, and give lessons in dancing.'

'In dancing!' he echoed. 'In Heaven's name, why dancing?'

'Because I love dancing. It is the only thing I can really do well. Old Monsieur du Toit used to say I was his best pupil. But that was long ago, while father was alive, before I came to Holland Park Avenue or to England. We used to live in Brittany when I was a tiny child. Of course I never go to dances. The aunts don't approve of it. But in my own room at night, after everybody has gone to bed, I take off my shoes and dance—until sometimes my stockings are full of holes, and I have to spend hours in mending them.'

She finished with a queer little ripple of laughter. And just then the cab stopped.

'Ah, dear me, it is all over,' she said, her face clouding over until it looked almost plain.

'I am glad you have found so much pleasure in so mild a dissipation,' Carstairs said, as he helped her to the pavement. 'You must let me repeat the experiment another day.'

The aunts were watching the pair from the dining-room window.

'Really,' said Aunt Esther to Aunt Sara, 'it is wonderful how well Donald Carstairs carries his years. He is certainly a very fine-looking man.'

'And how kind of him to take so much trouble to give the child a little pleasure,' chimed in Aunt Sara. 'After all, Esther, he is only forty. Who knows but what Delia may take his fancy. Many girls are married at her age——'

'Hush!' said her sister peremptorily. 'Here they come.'

Carstairs courteously but steadfastly refused the old ladies' suggestion that he should stay and spend the evening. He was dining out, he said, and had barely time to get home and dress.

Next day, Delia, having been sent out by her aunts to match some trimming at Barker's, took Kensington Gardens in her somewhat roundabout homeward way. As she loitered along slowly in the sunshine, a chiffon-clad whirlwind came skimming after her, which resolved itself into Minx.

'Well, my little Puritan fraud, and what have you got to say for yourself?' exclaimed the newcomer, as she grasped Delia's arm. 'You didn't see *me* yesterday. Oh, no! You were too much occupied. I never was so amazed in all my life. Who was your good-looking cavalier? I liked the look of him amazingly. I'm sure he would be worth cultivating.'

Delia laughed.

'Do you mean you saw me at the Steinway Hall?' she said.

'I do. Where else? And when the show was over I deliberately stalked you to the door. When lo!—like snowflakes on a river, you both melted out of sight and into a hansom. Who is he? And what were you doing with him all alone by yourselves?'

'He is a friend of my aunts; and he asked me to go to a concert, and I went,' was the matter-of-fact answer.

'A friend of your aunts,' jeered Minx. 'I dare say. A sort of "grandfather's cousin"? I know. Tell me all about him at once. What is his name, his age, his occupation? I insist on the most minute details.'

'His name is Carstairs—Donald Carstairs, I think. He isn't young; he is forty. And he has ironworks, or something like that, in Bedfordshire.'

'In Bedfordshire?' echoed Minx. 'Why, of course. His place is Garrioch Towers. I know a man who has bought an estate five or six miles from Garrioch. He is a widower—Carstairs, I mean—and has several children. Is that the man? Why yes, of course it must be. You sly little thing. Is he in love with you?'

'I shouldn't think so,' answered Delia with a sudden gale of laughter. 'I have only seen him twice. I like him, though. I like him very much indeed. I told him so.'

'Did you really? Upon my word, Delia, you are getting on. I wish the aunts could hear you. Mark my words, child, you will marry that man.'

'What, marry an elderly widower with children!' exclaimed Delia indignantly. 'That I certainly shall not. What a ridiculous idea.'

'I tell you, you will marry that man,' persisted the other in an impressive voice. 'It is written. It is Kismet. You may try to escape, but you can't. You need not curl up your nose like that. The man is still young—men are mere boys at forty nowadays—he is comparatively well off. He is a big, good-looking fellow. And he has what your aunts would call an "air." I myself would think twice before refusing him. But I should have no chance. His eye is upon you, my dear. He intends to make you the stepmother of his little ones. I hope you won't be refractory, because I mean to marry his next-door neighbour—the man I told you about.'

'Has he asked you?' inquired Delia. 'The next-door neighbour, I mean?'

'Not yet. But he's going to. The moment is coming nearer and nearer. He's an American, and awf—ully rich. I mean to have some times, I can tell you.'

'Are you in love with him?' asked Delia, after a pause.

'No, you romantic goose, I'm not exactly in love with him. But I like him immensely.'

'Is he good looking?'

'Well, no, not exactly good looking, perhaps.'

'Is he clever?'

'Well, I don't know that I should call him clever.'

'Is he just rich—nothing else?'

'Oh, no, he's a good many other things besides. I'll show him to you, of course, when everything is arranged.'

'What is his name?' asked Delia.

'His name, bless his dear heart, is Peter——'

'*Peter!*' ejaculated the other.

'Yes, Peter. Peter Dunstable. Peter V. Dunstable, to be exact. He's from New York city, and he's made a pile in Canadian lands, and I'm going to help him to spend it, you bet.'

'Is his accent as bad as that?' inquired Delia, opening her eyes.

'You'll see and hear, I tell you. I know some girls just wild about him. But I'm going to carry him off in triumph, and annex him for my very own. And I'll have diamond buttons on my dressing-gowns, and seed pearl embroideries on my petticoats, and every kind of unheard-of extravagance I can imagine. He'll grudge me nothing. For in his own queer go-ahead fashion he adores me.'

'What an absurd creature you are, Minx. Perhaps you'll end by adoring him too.'

'Perhaps. Who knows? That is his desire, I believe. Meanwhile take my advice, keep an eye on the mature widower—the foundry man. He

has possibilities, and ought to make an interesting lover. Men past their first youth usually do, if they're worth anything at all. As for his family, they might be drowned, or strangled, or shipped off abroad. You can soon make short work of them.'

'Minx, you are hopeless. Good-bye, I must run. I shall be late, and the aunts are waiting for this trimming.'

'*Au revoir*, then. I am coming to see you one day soon, aunts or no aunts. I foresee you will have something to tell me.'

A fortnight later Delia was again in Kensington Gardens, which, indeed, was a favourite resort of hers. The aunts, curiously enough, considered it an old world and therefore harmless place for a young girl's wanderings.

Delia, then, was sauntering home in the July sunshine when she met Carstairs.

He had been a fairly frequent visitor of late at the small house in Holland Park Avenue, and Delia was now quite at home with him.

'All alone, little girl?' he said, smiling as they shook hands. 'Do the aunts allow such unchaperoned freedom?'

'I am often here,' she answered. 'Do you know, I quite thought you must have left town. It is more than three days since you have been to see us.'

'I should not have left town without coming to say good-bye,' he said, turning to walk beside her.

'But I have been engaged in some rather troublesome business, and had to put pleasure in the background for a time. And what have you been doing with yourself since I saw you?'

'Oh, nothing. I mean, just the usual things.'

'Your tone sounds dismal.'

'I dare say. I feel dismal. Oh, Mr. Carstairs, I wish I might run away, and go out into the world, like the girls in story-books, and seek my fortune.'

'My dear child, I'm afraid you would find the real world strangely unlike the story-book world.'

'Perhaps. But, in any case, I should be free.'

'Freedom is not always happiness,' he answered gravely.

'Ah, you think so because you are a man, and have always been free.'

'And are you so madly anxious to escape from your safe, well-guarded cage?' he asked.

'I would give anything to escape,' she exclaimed passionately.

He looked at her with a very tender light in his kindly eyes.

'Anything, Delia?' he said, his voice holding a caressing inflection that she had not noticed in it formerly.

'Yes, I think so,' she answered uncertainly, for something in his manner vaguely troubled her.

'Would you give—yourself?' he said slowly.

'Myself?' she echoed, looking puzzled.

'Do you remember telling me,' he went on with-

out looking at her, 'that you had a great desire to travel all over the world with an—an ordinarily intelligent and sympathetic companion, or words to that effect ?'

'Yes, I remember, of course.'

'Well, Delia, do you think—how should you like me to be that companion ? I couldn't promise to take you round the world, perhaps. But I think I could give you a fair share of travelling joys from time to time. So what do you say ? Is it a bargain ?'

'You ?' she said blankly. 'You ? But I don't understand. I thought you said it wouldn't be proper ? And I suppose it wouldn't.'

'There is a way in which it could be made proper enough,' he answered shortly.

'How ? If you pretended you were my father ?' she exclaimed in an excited voice. 'Oh, Mr. Carstairs, do you really mean it ? Do you think you could persuade the aunts to let us ?'

'No, I do not,' he answered brusquely enough. 'Surely, Delia, you must understand what I mean ? I want you to —to marry me.'

'To *marry* you !' she repeated in a low shocked voice. 'To *marry* you !'

'Yes. Is the idea so very distasteful to you ?'

'But,' she said, looking up at him with wide, startled eyes, 'but I haven't known you for more than a few weeks. You don't know anything about me, hardly.'

'I know enough about you to—— In short, Delia, I am in earnest. I want you to be my wife.'

'How queer!' she said nervously. 'Are you—are you in love with me, then?'

He did not answer immediately. Then he said in a level voice:

'At forty a man does not fall in love in a few weeks. To be honest, I don't suppose I am in love with you. But I am very fond of you, child. And I think I could give you at least more freedom than you have now.'

'I hope to goodness,' the girl said, with crimson cheeks, 'that you did not think I was hinting that you should take pity on me? If I thought that, I should simply——'

'Don't be absurd,' he said impatiently. 'Such an idea never entered into my mind for a moment.'

'I am not a bit in love with you, you know,' she said, looking up at him with serious eyes.

'I am quite aware of that,' he answered in a curt tone. 'It would be very strange if you were.'

'It's a thousand pities we can't travel about together without being married,' she said with a sigh. 'Of course, I know we couldn't. But it is a pity. Don't you think so?'

He made no answer, and for a minute or so they walked on in absolute silence.

Then she said:

'Of course it would be a splendid thing for me. But—I don't think it would be very nice for you.

You see, I am not a bit clever, and not always good-tempered. And I very rarely look nice, and pretty often I look downright plain. And I should very likely keep doing things that would annoy you, or vex you. And——'

'I will take the risk of all that,' he replied quietly. 'Have you any further objections?'

'And, then, the aunts—oh, they would never allow it.'

'I will undertake the aunts. But *you*, Delia?'

'I don't know. Oh, I don't know.'

He smiled a little.

'I shall come and talk to the aunts to-morrow,' he said.

Chapter V

DELIA went home in a maze of doubt and bewilderment, mingled with a trembling exultation. She half hoped her aunts might refuse their consent. Then she was afraid that they certainly would do so.

Of course she did not love Carstairs. But—he was very kind, and courteous, and gentle. And he could show her at least part of the world from which she had always been shut out. And she would be free—free at last. So she told herself.

Carstairs called the next afternoon, and was shut up with the aunts for quite half an hour.

At the end of that time Delia heard him go out, and breathlessly watched him go down the steps and out at the gate.

'Well,' she said, under her breath, 'I do think he might have asked to see me. However, I dare say the aunts were horrified at the idea of my marrying him—or marrying anybody. And, after all, I'm not sure that I want to. It would be a way out, to be sure. But—the worst of being married is that you can't be unmarried again. It's for always—until one dies. And yet——'

At this point in her meditations there was a tap at the door, and Jane delivered the message that her aunts would be glad if she would go downstairs to the drawing-room.

Delia found the two old ladies looking pale and excited.

'Cordelia,' said Aunt Esther in a very solemn voice, 'sit down, please.'

Delia obeyed.

'Oh, my dear,' put in Aunt Sara tearfully, 'this is a very solemn moment.'

Delia said nothing. Though the day was warm she felt cold, and her limbs were trembling.

'Mr. Carstairs has just been here,' went on Aunt Esther. 'Doubtless you are aware of the purport of his visit. He indicated as much, indeed.'

But Delia was dumb.

'He has done you and us a very great honour,' continued Miss Penfold. 'He has proposed for your hand.'

'Oh,' was the confused answer.

'It is a wonderful and happy chance for you,' resumed Aunt Esther, 'though of course it was naturally something of a surprise to us—for several reasons. His position is all that could be wished. And the disparity of years is not such as to be insuperable. He is a good, upright man, I have every reason to believe, and he has been known to us since his boyhood. He will make a good and indulgent husband, I have no doubt.'

Aunt Esther spoke less austerely than usual, and her stern old face looked almost gentle. Aunt Sara was crying a little, dabbing her pretty faded eyes with a finely embroidered handkerchief.

'We shall miss you, child, we shall miss you sadly,' she said, and her voice quivered.

'Then—you want me to marry him?' said the girl incredulously.

'We have given our consent, my dear,' said her elder aunt in a conclusive tone. 'Mr. Carstairs will be here this evening as your betrothed husband.'

'But—but I didn't promise,' faltered Delia, her heart beginning to beat very quickly.

'My dear child, of course you did not,' put in Aunt Sara. 'It would have been very unseemly if you had, until our consent had been obtained.'

Delia went over to the window, and stood looking out at the endless procession of traffic that rushed to and fro.

'We are not in the least in love with one another,' she said slowly. 'We are just going to be very great friends, nothing more.'

'Delia!' exclaimed Aunt Esther in a deeply-shocked tone. 'This freedom of speech is most unbecoming. The expression "in love" sounds most indelicate on the lips of a young girl. Doubtless Mr. Carstairs has the requisite amount of affection for you, or he would not seek to make you his wife. As far as a young woman is concerned, love

comes after marriage. At least, so I have been given to understand. Now, my dear, you may go to your room. Doubtless you will be glad of a little time for quiet meditation.'

Both aunts then kissed the somewhat dismayed bride-elect, who went to her room at the top of the house, and sat down by the open window to review her feelings.

Was she glad? Was she sorry? Was she afraid? She hardly knew. A little of all these things, perhaps. She liked Mr. Carstairs. She liked him very much indeed. But, as she had told him, she was not in the very least in love with him. He did not in any way embody the personality of the somewhat impossible being whom she had hitherto vaguely dreamed of as a lover.

This hazy hero of her maiden visions hovered midway between the semblance of a Greek god, and a steel engraving of the Corsair, in an ancient copy of Byron's (selected) poems. He was alternately savage and tender, and generally rather unfitted for life in the family circle.

Mr. Carstairs did not look either like a Greek god or a Corsair. He merely looked what he was—a refined, reserved, passably good-looking English gentleman. Delia doubted if he could go to the extremes of either fierceness or tenderness—not knowing that these extremes are possible to most men. And as he had distinctly stated that he was not in love with her, the probabilities were that he

would not expect to kiss her or to be kissed in return. That was certainly a point in his favour.

It was a pity he was a widower, she reflected further. She had at no time contemplated marrying a man who had been married before. And then, there were those four children. She wondered if they would like her. She was pretty sure she should not like them.

'I wonder *why* he wants to marry me?' she murmured.

She got up from her chair, and went over to the looking-glass, staring at her own reflection therein with more than ordinary interest.

She was really looking almost pretty this afternoon, she could not help thinking.

We all have our best and worst days, as far as our looks are concerned, however high or low their standard. And this was one of Delia's best days. She put on a little muslin frock with rose-coloured sprigs scattered over it (it had once been Aunt Sara's), and took down her hair, and brushed it until its waves shone like copper. She had no jewellery, for the aunts did not approve of jewellery for young girls. As an afterthought, she put on her best shoes. They were a little tight, but they were rather quaint and pretty, and had also been Aunt Sara's.

Mr. Carstairs came about half-past eight, having dined earlier than usual. Delia suddenly felt rather shy, especially when he took her hand in greeting

and looked down at her with his grave kind eyes.

After a little desultory conversation Aunt Esther looked at Aunt Sara, and both rose and went out of the room, having previously arranged to give the 'betrothed couple,' as they quaintly called them, exactly twenty minutes alone. Aunt Sara had suggested half an hour, but Aunt Esther was obdurate.

'Well, little girl,' said Carstairs, as the door closed, 'have you repented of your bargain? You almost look as if you had.'

'But I didn't promise,' she said uneasily. 'I—I—oh, it doesn't seem real, somehow.'

'Have you repented?' he repeated insistently, and with just a hint of sternness in his voice.

Her eyes filled with tears; she could hardly have told why.

'Delia,' he said, taking both her hands in his, 'are you afraid of me, you poor little lonely child?'

She shook her head.

'Then—you will marry me?'

After a minute she whispered:

'Yes.'

'Of your own free will?'

She nodded.

Presently he said:

'I wonder if this will make things seem more real to you.'

As he spoke he slipped a ring upon the third finger of her left hand.

She saw the glitter of diamonds, and exclaimed :

'Oh, is it for me ?'

'No,' he answered, smiling a little. 'I think, perhaps, you had better pass it on to one of the aunts.'

'It is—it is awfully kind of you,' she said in a breathless kind of way. 'But I am afraid the aunts will say it is far too handsome for me.'

'The aunts have nothing to do with it,' he replied coolly. 'It is a matter between you and me. Do you like it ?'

'Like it ?' she echoed in an ecstasy of delight. 'It is the most beautiful ring I have ever seen in my life. Often and often I have looked at diamond rings in shop-windows, and wished I might have one. But I never saw one I liked so much as this—never.'

'I am glad of that,' he said quietly.

Then he put his arm round her, and kissed her forehead. It was a very gentle and brotherly kind of kiss, and, somewhat to her surprise, Delia found that she did not at all object to it. Even the aunts, she felt, could not take exception to so decorous a salute.

Nevertheless, she was dimly conscious that it was not at all the kind of caress the mingled Greek god and Corsair would have bestowed upon her in the circumstances.

She twisted her new ring round and round her

finger, and held it now this way, now that way, the better to observe the effect.

'I'll try to please you in everything,' she said, awkwardly enough. 'But I shouldn't wonder if you regret it later on. I can't imagine what you want to marry me for.'

'Perhaps I, like you, want a sensible and intelligent companion,' he answered.

'I'm not always sensible, though,' she said with an impatient sigh. 'And I'm not sure that I'm always intelligent, even.'

'No? Well, I dare say I shall fall short too at times. So we can call quits. And now, my dear, I am going to ask you to let our marriage be as soon as possible.'

'I don't mind when it is,' was the easy answer, 'if the aunts don't.'

'My good child,' he said, frowning slightly, 'I am not going to marry your aunts, I am going to marry you.'

Delia opened her lips to speak, then checked herself.

'Well,' said Carstairs, 'what were you going to say? I believe you are afraid of me after all.'

She looked up at him half shyly.

'But—you thought of marrying one of my aunts once, you know,' she said in a matter-of-fact voice.

'I thought of *what?*' he asked sharply. 'What on earth do you mean?'

'Well, you did think of marrying Aunt Sophronia,'

she said in remonstrant tones. 'I know, because Aunt Sara told me.'

'Then Aunt Sara knows more than I do,' he answered with a short laugh. 'Good God! do you mean to say your aunts have been under that impression all those years?'

She nodded.

'Wasn't it true?' she asked curiously.

'True?' he echoed. 'I never had the faintest intention of such a thing. Why, she was a mere child, and I was a lad of barely twenty.'

'Ah, well, never mind,' she said. 'I'm sure I shouldn't care if you had wanted to marry them all. You see it isn't as if we were in love with each other.'

'No,' he said with an odd smile, 'that is true.'

Then, after a pause, he went on:

'Shall we say the tenth of next month, then?'

'Very well,' she said, 'just as you like.'

'And shall you object to having a very quiet wedding, without any of the usual fuss or nonsense?'

'No'—dubiously—'I don't care—much.'

'Then leave it all to me,' he said, with an obvious air of relief. 'I will arrange everything.'

And just then the door opened, and the aunts sailed into the room.

Shortly afterwards Carstairs went away, and Delia sat at the window, looking out into the starlit night, while the old ladies discussed her wedding garments.

On the following day Minx drove boldly up to the

door in a motor, and asked to see Miss Delia Penfold. Delia herself was just coming downstairs, and as she greeted her friend, imparted to her the joyful news that the aunts had gone out for the afternoon.

So the girls ensconced themselves in the prim, rose-scented drawing-room. And in a flash Minx pounced upon Delia's left hand.

'You little wretch!' she almost screamed. 'Where did you get this ring?'

'It is my engagement-ring,' said Delia in a demure voice.

'Your engagement-ring? What — is it the widowed iron-man?'

Delia nodded.

'I knew it!' exclaimed Minx triumphantly. 'And so you have really promised to marry him?'

'Yes.'

'When?'

'On the tenth of next month.'

'Humph! The iron-man doesn't mean to let the grass grow under his feet, apparently. What do the aunts say?'

'Oh, they rather approve,' Delia answered, screwing her small face into a sphinx-like smile.

The other laughed.

'I dare say the poor man is glad to get it over,' she said. 'It's nothing new to him, you know. Well, and what kind of lover does he make?'

'I hardly know yet. It was only arranged yesterday.'

'Did he kiss you?' inquired Miss Crayshaw after a pause.

'Yes, of course.'

'Well, you needn't blush. They usually do. But I dare say you've never been kissed before.'

'Have you?' asked Delia.

Minx laughed soundlessly, rolled her gloves into a ball, and threw them across the room.

'I too have not been idle,' she said. 'Look at my ring! I fancy the stones are a bit larger than yours, aren't they, dear?'

'Yes, I'm sure they are,' said Delia cheerfully after a careful examination. 'But I like my ring best.'

'Of course you do. Quite right,' returned the other. 'And so do I like mine best.'

'And are you really engaged, Minx?' asked Delia with interest.

'Of course. Do you think you have a monopoly of all the good things of this life?'

'And is it to the rich American, Peter—Peter—I forget his name?'

'Yes, it is to the rich and American Peter. His principal name is Dunstable. He sailed for New York this morning, but he'll be back in six weeks or so. We have been engaged since the day before yesterday. And how do you think the dear, funny, original boy proposed to me?'

'I don't know. By letter?'

'Pooh, no. There wouldn't be anything original in that. Try again.'

'By telegram, then?'

'No. But you'll never guess. So I'd better tell you. By telephone.'

'By telephone?' repeated Delia. 'How queer. I don't think I should like that.'

'You would if you were me. I liked it. So awfully fresh and uncommon. Listen, this is exactly what took place. You know we have a private telephone, and the day before yesterday as I was passing through the hall the bell—the telephone bell—rang. I answered. And this is the conversation that followed. You'll know which are Peter's remarks by his accent, which I will try to reproduce.'

'"Are you there?"

'"Yes. Who are you?"

'"Dunstable—Peter Dunstable. Are you Miss Crayshaw?"

'"Yes."

'"Well, I'm sailing for New York day after to-morrow, and haven't a moment to say good-bye in person—unless under certain conditions."

'"Oh, really. I hope you'll have a good time."

'"No, I don't expect I shall. I'm going on business only."

'"I hope you'll do good business, then."

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' " Thanks. I mean to. But I've an important question to ask you. Will you marry me ?"

' " *What !*"

' " Will you *marry* me ?"

' " Marry you ? Do you mean before you go ?"

' " No. There isn't time. I say—it's too bad. I can hear you laughing. But I'm in earnest. Will you ?"

' Silence.

' " Miss Crayshaw !"

' Silence.

' " Are you there ?"

' Silence.

' " Are you *there ?*"

' " Yes."

' " Well, did you hear what I said ? Will you marry me ? Will—you—marry—me ?"

' " But why ? We're very well as we are."

' " Why ? Good Lord, I'm in love with you !"

' " Oh."

' " You might answer as quickly as possible, please. I've an appointment in five minutes."

' " Well—I suppose I must say yes—but I never heard such an extraordinary——"

' " All right. I'll see you to-morrow forenoon at eleven sharp. Good-bye."

' Then he rang off, and I collapsed.'

' What a very queer man he must be,' said Delia, looking somewhat scandalized.

' He's queer, but a dear,' returned the business-

like Peter's *fiancée*. 'And he's even better off than we thought he was. Dad and the mater and I are simply ready to crawl round his feet—until he's safely landed, and I'm Mrs. P. V. D. He could buy up your iron man three times over.'

'Mr. Carstairs is quite rich enough for me,' said Delia, flushing a little.

'There, there, did I disparage its brand-new sweetheart, then!' said Minx teasingly. 'Never mind, the iron-man's all right, and can look after his own hand, I fancy. He hasn't that chin for nothing. There isn't much of the doormat about Mr. Donald Carstairs, if I'm a judge of profile. You won't get too much of your own way, Delia, my girl. When did you say you were to be married, by the way. On the tenth of August? Put it off a bit, and let's both be married on the same day. Peter and I have arranged for the middle of September.'

Delia shook her head.

'Mr. Carstairs wants it to be very quiet; and I can't see *you* having anything like a quiet wedding, Minx.'

'No, I fancy not,' answered that young woman briskly. 'But mark my words, Delia, if you give in to your man now, you'll find you have to go on giving in as long as you both shall live. Insist on a little delay, and a gay, slap-up wedding, with all the usual trimmings.'

'No,' said Delia. 'I promised.'

Minx turned her eyes ceiling-wards.

'Oh well, my dear, if you're going to begin by keeping all your promises to your husband, you'll find your work cut out for you. Well, I must be off. I wish you all joy, you prospective Griselda. I hope my Peter isn't harbouring any illusive hopes about *my* slavish obedience to his wishes. If he is, I'm afraid the band will begin to play. Ta-ta. Love to the aunts, and tell the widowed iron-man that Peter and I are going to be his next-door neighbours. I hope you'll formally introduce him to me before the wedding. I really feel as if I could love him — if it weren't for trifling obstacles called Delia and Peter.'

In the evening Carstairs came. And Delia felt a curious thrill of pride as he came into the room. He belonged to her, this big, fine-looking man, who had chosen her for his wife. She felt suddenly glad that she was going to marry him.

The aunts fluttered and bridled, and finally, as before, rustled away.

'It is really quite proper,' Aunt Esther said, when she and her sister had established themselves in the dining-room. 'Donald Carstairs is not like a young man. And I dare say he expects it.'

'Ah yes,' sighed Aunt Sara. 'I suppose all lovers are alike, young and old.'

For Aunt Sara had had a lover in her youth, but death had snatched him away from her. Aunt Esther had never, as she often proudly boasted,

given a thought to any man, though many men had given more than a thought to her in the days of long ago.

Carstairs, however, was not an ardent lover; and the aunts might easily have been present for any love-making that took place True, he kissed his little *fiancée*. But Delia could not help feeling that he probably kissed his own daughters in precisely similar fashion.

She felt a little shy with him; for every now and then she was obsessed by the idea that he had only offered to marry her because he was sorry for her. And, indeed, this was, to a certain extent, perfectly true.

'Mr. Carstairs,' she began suddenly, 'I wish I knew why you want to marry me. Is it only because I told you I was lonely and——'

She stopped, and, to her own surprise, her eyes filled with unshed tears.

He put his arm round her, and drew her to him gently, as though she were a child.

'I think it was partly because I am very lonely myself,' he said, with a half-stifled sigh.

'Really?' she whispered.

'Really.'

'I don't very well see how you can be, though,' she went on after a few moment's thought. 'You have four children.'

'Yes, I have four children. But that doesn't always ensure companionship. I'm afraid you'll

find your new home something of a bear-garden, my dear. I don't know exactly why—but everything always seems at sixes and sevens, somehow.'

'Haven't you a housekeeper?' she asked.

'Yes, but she is a phenomenally easy-going kind of person. She has been in the family since before I was born, and is as obstinate as a mule in some things. She's a good old sort, though. She spoilt me all along the line when I was a lad.'

'Oh, Mr. Carstairs, I wish I could be your housekeeper!' exclaimed Delia. 'But I dare say, if she is old and queer, she mightn't like it. I really can housekeep. Even Aunt Esther allows that I can.'

He touched her hair lightly.

'You may play at housekeeping, or at anything else you like, child, so long as you are happy,' he answered. 'But are you always going to call me Mr. Carstairs. My name is Donald, you know.'

'I could never call you that,' she said in a low voice.

'I think I should like you to try,' he said quietly.

She was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, laying her fingers shyly on his sleeve:

'Couldn't I call you—Don?'

'If you wish it.'

'Very well, then, I will. But not just yet. It seems too much like taking what Aunt Esther would call an unpardonable liberty.'

'What a queer little girl you are,' he said. 'I wonder how you will get on with my other children.

For you are nothing but a child, in spite of those twenty years you are so proud of.'

She shook her head.

'I don't expect they will like me very much, just at first,' she answered. 'Isn't it strange to think I shall be their stepmother ?'

'Yes,' he said, looking down at her with what was very nearly tenderness.

His arm was still round her, and he drew her closer, until her head rested against his shoulder.

'You will try to be happy, won't you ?' he said in a low voice.

She laughed nervously.

'I don't think I shall have to try much,' she answered. 'Why, Mr. Carstairs, you don't seem to understand that you are opening the door of my cage.'

'Are you not afraid,' he said, 'that I may only take you out of one cage to put you into another ?'

A startled look came into her eyes.

'I never thought of that,' she whispered.

Their eyes met. His looked sad, she thought, but very kind.

He did not speak for a second or two. Then he said quietly :

'I was only jesting, Delia. I think I can make you happy.'

'Yes,' she answered, in a hesitating voice. 'I know you will always be kind.'

Then the aunts came in, and Delia stole out of the room.

Chapter VI

THE consideration of Delia's trousseau was a matter of serious thought and worry to the Misses Penfold. So they were immensely relieved when Carstairs begged them, as a personal favour, only to buy such things as were absolutely necessary, and let the little bride get the rest in Paris. And Delia secretly rejoiced also.

The wedding was a very quiet affair. As a great concession, the aunts had permitted Delia to invite her friend Minx ; and an old college chum of Carstairs officiated as best man. The only other wedding-guests were the stamp-collecting professor before mentioned, and his antediluvian sister.

When the ceremony was over, the little company repaired to the old house in Holland Park Avenue, to partake of what the Misses Penfold called a 'cold collation.'

But, somehow, it was not a cheerful banquet. Minx, to be sure, was gay and outrageous as usual, and flirted disgracefully with the best man ; and Alec Dinwoodie 'played up' with praiseworthy aptitude. But with these two exceptions, the

wedding-party was silent and more than a little depressed.

It all seemed like a vague, melancholy dream to Delia, when at last she found herself alone with her newly-made husband in a compartment of the tidal train to Dover. As the train flew on through the summer night, a curious sense of desolation came over the little bride, and she clung to her bridegroom's arm with a sharp, sobbing cry.

'Oh, I want to go home,' she burst out in a choked voice. 'I want to go home. Why did you not give me more time? I shouldn't have married you. You are too old, and I am too young. And I know you'll be sorry, and so shall I.'

And—oh, unheard of weakness in a modern maiden!—she began to cry.

Carstairs gazed at her in pardonable amazement, not unmixed with resentment.

'My dear Delia,' he said, a little stiffly, 'surely it is rather late to think of all that now. I understood you to be quite contented—quite happy——'

He broke off suddenly, for her childishly forlorn expression and attitude struck him with a queer kind of remorse and compassion.

'Dear,' he said, putting an arm lightly round her shoulders, and speaking very gently, 'I shall be very good to you. I don't think you need be afraid. You are tired and excited just now, and no wonder. But cheer up. Things will look brighter when you

have had a rest, and something to eat. Lean back and close your eyes, and perhaps you may fall asleep, while I have a look at the papers.'

Very prosaic comfort from a bridegroom, perhaps. But it suited Delia just then better than caresses and lovemaking would have done.

'You are sure you will be kind to me?' she whispered unsteadily.

'My dear little girl, for what do you take me?' he said in a very tender voice. 'Of course I shall be kind to you. Are we not going to be chums and travelling companions? Have you forgotten that you are going to have your heart's desire?'

She sat up, and smoothed her hair. For her hat had slipped to one side, and she looked rather dishevelled.

'Are my eyes red?' she asked, turning her face towards him as frankly as a child might.

'Yes,' he answered gravely. 'They are, a little. But it will soon go off. Besides, there is plenty of time for them to resume their normal appearance before we reach Dover. And you are not going to cry any more, are you?'

'No,' she answered shamefacedly. 'I don't know what made me behave so childishly. You are very kind, Mr. Carstairs.'

'It would be strange if I were not,' he said in his deep, quiet voice, 'to-day—of all days. I am going to take care of you always, you strange, wild-looking little thing. Don't you know that?'

'And you won't—you won't despise me?' she stammered incoherently.

'Despise you?' he echoed. 'That is hardly likely, I think.'

'Oh, you know what I mean,' she cried desolately. 'I said I would marry you, though I hardly knew you, and though I didn't love you, or anything. What must you think of me?'

'Nothing very dreadful,' he said, with an indulgent smile.

Then he took up a paper, and left her to her own devices.

From then onward Delia's wedding journey was all that she had planned that her imaginary tour should be, with one slight difference—that she was married.

As the days went on she realized that she was becoming very fond of her big, quiet husband. He was very reserved, she found, and very sensitive in many little ways that she hardly comprehended. But he studied her and understood her as no one else had ever taken the trouble to do. And he was generous almost to extravagance, which, of course, a man ought to be on his wedding journey, if at no other time.

She confided to him somewhat naïvely one evening as they drove home from the Bois, that she thought, after all, a husband made a more satisfactory and interesting travelling-companion than even a father or an unattached male friend would have done.

To which he replied somewhat drily that he quite agreed with her.

As they were not in love with one another, they had no tiffs or misunderstandings, and got to know one another's little ways passing well. Carstairs rather exerted himself to be entertaining and companionable; and satisfied to the full Delia's insatiable desire for information regarding all the places of interest in the French capital, which to her were so new, and to him almost as things forgotten. Nevertheless, it was a pleasure to him to ransack his memory to keep pace with her eager questionings.

Also the young bride fairly revelled in new clothes; and, as her own taste was fairly good, and Carstairs' taste was unerring, she speedily emerged from her somewhat dowdy chrysalis as a very dainty little butterfly indeed.

He found her one day, just before leaving Paris, gazing exhaustively at her own very pleasing image in the long mirror in her bedroom.

' " Dost like the picture?" ' he said, smiling down at her absorbed young face.

She looked up at him with pink cheeks and dancing eyes.

' I look quite different,' she said exultantly ' Don't you think so ? I look like a girl in a book. I always wanted to look like that. Oh, Don—you have been very good to me !'

It was the first time she had called him anything save the formal ' Mr. Carstairs,' and the sound of

the quaint little diminutive of his name from her lips thrilled him strangely.

He was not, as I have said, in love with her. At least, he was not consciously in love with her. But it is difficult for any man to preserve strictly Platonic sentiments towards a fresh and attractive young girl with whom he is thrown into constant companionship. And Carstairs was no anchorite. On the contrary, he was essentially human.

After leaving Paris they wandered through France to Italy, and then, by easy stages, through Germany, and about the last week in September came to an anchor in the queer little village of Grünwald, with which Delia immediately fell in love.

The tiny place was built in the heart of a great pine forest. The houses were scattered about in haphazard fashion, regardless of any plan or symmetry. Some of them had balconies on the top floor, reached by outside flights of steps ; some were built bungalow fashion.

Here Delia, to her inconceivable delight, saw real storks, that stood upon one leg, and reminded her of Hans Anderson's stories.

She met one or two very pleasant people here, who were interested in the bright, pretty young girl, and her grave, good-looking husband. But Carstairs had his nation's insular prejudice—now, happily, dying out—against making promiscuous acquaintances, and Delia was not yet emancipated

enough from the trammels of her maidenhood to take the initiative in such matters.

But during their stay at the peaceful little village in the forest, the unexpected happened, for Carstairs was suddenly taken ill. A thorough wetting led to a violent chill, which, being disregarded—for Carstairs was not given to coddling his health, or even taking reasonable care of it—resulted in a sharp attack of pneumonia.

Delia, absolutely ignorant of illness, save in its more insignificant forms, listened, pale and trembling, to the frowning old German doctor's ominous opinion of her husband's danger.

'Do you mean,' she faltered, with white lips, 'that he may *die?*'

The kind, though fierce-looking, old man looked at her sharply through his spectacles.

'Ah, to die, that is the end,' he said in his halting English. 'We will hope that things may not be so bad. But there is no disguising that the husband is ill—and severely. But I will do my best to pull him through, as you say in your England, so do not lose heart. You are on the wedding-journey, *nicht war?* Ach! that is sad. But the husband is big and strong, and ought to make a good fight. Leave it to me, *kleine Braut.* I will do my best, and the best of Karl Klopner is not so small.'

Delia was very unhappy in those days, for Carstairs had come to mean so much to her. Indeed, now he meant almost everything in her

life. The thought of coming years without him terrified her.

Despite her utter inexperience, she was a born nurse, and obstinately refused to delegate that office to other hands.

Herr Klopner grunted approval, and admitted that with practice, she might one day understand nursing.

When Carstairs was at last past the worse, he noted with alarm the pale and pinched face of his little wife. She no longer looked like the careless child he had married.

'Dear,' he said one evening as she sat beside him in the barely-furnished bedroom with its painted floor, and uncurtained windows, 'this is pretty ghastly for you. I am awfully sorry about it. But I am quite round the corner now, and you must not be cooped up in this room any longer. You look like a small ghost. Go and get some fresh air, you poor scared-looking child. You are not going to get rid of me yet awhile.'

'Oh, Don, I have been so miserable,' she said unsteadily. 'What should I have done if—if anything had happened to you?'

'Well, I suppose you would have had to go back to the aunts,' he said. 'But you wouldn't have been dependent on them. I have settled all that, little woman.'

'Don't!' she said sharply. 'You make me feel wretched.'

'Silly child,' he said, smiling a little. 'I shan't

die any sooner for having provided for you in my will. By the way, do you know you have made quite a conquest of our shaggy doctor? He says you are a very unusual and very much-to-be-admired young woman. Now, run away and have your dinner. I will send for you if I want you.'

Delia went obediently. It was a lovely evening, and the heat of the day had been tempered by a cool steady breeze. She stood for a moment at one of the open windows; then went downstairs and out of doors, and so through the long dining-room to the cosy table where she and Carstairs usually sat. A quaintly costumed waitress darted forward to attend to her; for Delia was a popular little person, and the whole village sympathized with her in her husband's illness. Dr. Klopner was seated a few tables away. He nodded and smiled at her; then busied himself with his favourite course, consisting of hot bacon, an uncooked herring, and potatoes baked in their skins.

When she had finished her own simple meal, she strolled out into the gardens and a little way up the hill, which was laid out in narrow winding paths, and dotted here and there with seats. Just now most of the seats were empty; but soon the other diners sauntered out by twos and threes, and Delia was no longer alone. One tall well-dressed woman with an unfledged daughter in tow, bore down upon the bench where Delia had placed herself, and said genially:

'Good evening, Mrs. Carstairs, I am so glad to see you amongst us again, and to know from Dr. Klopner that your husband is out of danger.'

As she spoke she seated herself, and her daughter followed suit.

Delia responded cordially, for she liked this big kind-hearted woman, and was, besides, intensely sorry for her.

Some ten or eleven years ago Mrs. Walham Orpington Green had been not only handsome but almost beautiful. Now, thanks to a motoring accident her face was irretrievably disfigured, and she was plain enough to be a grief to her friends, and a joy to her enemies. Personally, she appeared indifferent to the loss of her beauty.

'I have escaped with all my limbs intact,' she was wont to say, 'and with my eyesight unimpaired. And a motor accident that leaves one so much, hasn't done its worst, by any means.'

Her daughter Peggy was not in the least pretty. But she had an earnest, honest little face with a healthy skin and a piquant nose, and her black hair was picturesquely abundant.

'You must have had a dreadfully anxious time, you poor child,' said Mrs. Walham Orpington Green sympathetically, as she took Delia's hand. 'And you look so absurdly young to be married at all.'

'I am twenty,' said Delia with a tiny sigh. 'Surely that isn't young to be married?'

'Twenty? Are you really? I should never

have thought it. Why, you don't look so old as my little Peggy, and she is only seventeen.'

'I shall be twenty to-morrow,' Delia said, turning her wedding-ring absently round her finger.

'Your husband is ever so much older, isn't he?' put in Peggy abruptly.

'Yes. He is just twice as old as I am,' the bride answered. 'But he is the kindest husband in the world,' she added hastily.

'Yes. But yours wasn't a love-match, my dear,' reflected the woman of the world astutely. 'And I wonder what engineering brought it about.'

But aloud she only said:

'He seems devoted to you, and he is a very fine-looking man. I suppose you have been having an ideal honeymoon?'

'Yes,' was the absent answer. 'I have always longed to see the world. And I suppose I have seen a good deal of it since my wedding-day.'

'Oh, the world,' said Peggy contemptuously, 'who wants to see the world. What the mater calls the world is balls and crushes and garden-parties and races, and all that rot. What I should love would be to marry a farmer, and keep hens and milk cows and make hay, and dine at midday, and go to bed at ten.'

'Silly girl!' interpolated her mother indulgently.

'Or,' went on Peggy, 'I should like to be like that friend of Minx Crayshaw's, Delia—I forget her name, who lived with two darling old-fashioned

aunts, and did housework, and hemmed handkerchiefs, and made jam, and——'

'Minx Crayshaw!' interrupted Delia. 'Do you know her, then?'

'Rather so,' laughed Peggy. 'Why, she's a kind of distant cousin. Do you know her?'

'Yes,' was the quiet answer. 'And my name is Delia.'

Mrs. Walham Orpington Green looked at the little bride very kindly.

'Ah, I see,' she murmured.

But in her heart she reflected: 'Poor little soul! So the big stern-looking husband was the way out for the caged bird.'

'You must have been awfully happy!' exclaimed Peggy. 'I wonder you could leave the dear old-fashioned aunts. Minx always makes fun of them. But I think they must be dears. I suppose, though, you fell dreadfully in love with your husband; and he certainly looks very nice.'

Delia blushed somewhat painfully. But in the gathering dusk her companions did not see the violence of the blush.

'Tut, tut, Peg,' said the girl's mother good-naturedly. 'Your tongue runs too fast.'

'I must go to my husband now,' said Delia, as she rose. 'Good-evening. We shall meet to-morrow, I hope.'

'You put your foot in it, Peggy,' said the elder lady, as Delia's slender figure faded into the dusk.

'Don't you see that it has been a prosaic match, partly arranged by the old aunts, and that love is not in it. If I remember, Minx told us as much.'

'Oh, Minx,' was the brusque answer. 'Minx always gets hold of the most ill-natured end of the story. As for that dainty little Delia, she is head over ears in love with her husband, only she doesn't know it. What she does know is that he is not in love with her. And the thought of it is beginning to trouble her.'

'You are a romantic goose, Peg,' said her mother placidly. 'I hope you won't end by falling in love with a tutor, or an organist, or something equally impossible.'

'Don't be afraid,' answered Peggy, with a scornful uplifting of her dark head. 'I'm not going to think of falling in love for the next ten years at least, if then.'

'Ah, yes, yes,' reflected her mother, with a contented smile. 'We know all about that, child. But we'll see, we'll see.'

For she had a suitable match in her eye for mutinous Peggy. But as the 'match' was not yet of age, she could afford to await the course of events.

Meanwhile Delia stole quietly upstairs to her husband's room, where she found Dr. Klopner with a daily paper, out of which he was reading scraps of news to his patient.

'Ach! here she is, the little runaway bride,' he

called out, looking at her over his glasses. 'I have been telling the good husband that to-morrow, if the weather goes well, he may sit up for a time, and next day perhaps half an hour on the balcony. So ?'

Delia came over to the bed, and stood looking down at her husband with wistfully anxious eyes.

'Do you think you will be well enough ?' she said, laying her little hand on his shoulder.

'*Ach, du lieber allmächtiger Gott !*' exclaimed the doctor, with gruff voice but twinkling eyes. 'Listen, then, how the little one makes of no note that I have given permission. I shall turn the husband over to another doctor, who knows no English. And then what shall you do ? Well, I leave you now. So good-night until to morrow.'

'Delia,' said Carstairs after a silence, 'should you be very much disappointed if we returned to England sooner than we had planned ?'

'No,' she answered, 'I should not be disappointed at all.'

'Sure ?'

'Quite sure. I should like to see your—our home.'

'Then we can leave in about a week or ten days,' her husband said with an air of relief. 'Klopner thinks I may manage it by then. There has been some disturbance at the works, and I feel I ought to be there.'

Chapter VII

A BIG dingy schoolroom, lit only by the firelight and the early dusk of a wet October afternoon.

'Fancy the governor getting married again!' growled a boy of fifteen, who was lying on his stomach in front of the fire, supporting himself by his elbows. 'I wonder what she'll be like.'

A girl of his own age—as a matter of fact they were twins—replied somewhat mournfully:

'I *know* what she'll be like. She'll be superior. She'll try to keep us in order——'

She was interrupted by a yell of derision which arose from the boy who had just spoken and a kindred spirit about a couple of years younger, who was hanging head downward from a high bookcase.

The yell was echoed joyously by an exceedingly plump young person of six, who was hugging to her heart a weirdly ugly and decrepit doll.

'Keep us in order!' repeated the acrobat of the bookcase, letting himself down with a thud. 'My good Nan, if you and Jock and me don't knock that idea out of her, my name isn't Bob Carstairs.'

Nan shook her head.

'Ah, but you forget. She'll have father to back her up against us,' she said, sighing dismally.

'Oh, don't want her to come,' wailed Lulu, clutching her doll more closely to her neck.

'Neither do we, cry-baby,' snapped Bob. 'So stop that. If you begin the howling trick she'll get the governor to send you away.'

'Oh doodness!' wept Lulu, who in spite of her six years dispensed almost entirely with the use of pronouns, and never could manage the letter 'g' at the beginning of a word. 'Oh doodness—won't be sent away. Will bite and scream.'

'Shut up,' said Jock. 'I won't let you be sent away, if you're a decent little kid, and hold your tongue. Besides, we don't know what she's like, yet. She may be all right. Some stepmothers are.'

'Don't want a stepmother!' shrieked Lulu. 'Oh doodness, don't want a stepmother.'

'I wonder if she's young,' went on Jock, extinguishing Lulu with the tablecloth, 'or pretty.'

'I shouldn't mind so much if she was,' grumbled Nan. 'But I know she won't be.'

'You don't know anything about her,' said Bob. 'Anyhow, they'll be here in about an hour, and then we'll see.'

* * * * *

A few hours later they were all grouped together again, talking eagerly and excitedly.

'She's not bad-looking,' announced Jock, with

the air of a competent judge. 'But she looks just like a little girl.'

'Thank goodness, she didn't kiss us,' grinned Bob. 'I was in a stew in case she would.'

'She kissed me,' said Nan, 'and her face was soft and nice, like a baby's.'

'Kissed me too,' chimed in Lulu. 'Face all soft and nice, like—like a feather-brush.'

'I thought she looked kind of sad,' went on Nan. 'I don't know why.'

'Well, what did you expect, married to the governor?' growled Jock. 'I didn't think he looked very festive himself, if you come to that.'

'He's been ill,' said Nan. 'Batty told me. He caught a chill at some queer place in Switzerland—no, Germany—and nearly died.'

'Serves him right,' grinned Bob. 'What does he want going gallivanting about honey-mooning among the mountains at his age?'

'I daresay he doesn't feel old,' objected Nan. 'Look at Rochester in *Jane Eyre*. He was as old.'

'Pooh! He was in a book,' said Bob. 'That was different.'

'Perhaps our stepmother is in love with him,' observed Nan pensively.

'Bah!' said Jock, with an expressive wave of a far from spotless hand.

Meanwhile, the inmates of the schoolroom were themselves under discussion.

'Well, do you find them utter little savages?'

asked Carstairs, as he lay on the sofa in the library after dinner.

For he was still far from strong, and the journey had tired him.

Delia hesitated.

'I'm afraid they resent my coming,' she said. 'I suppose it is only natural. I know they don't like me.'

He moved uneasily.

'My dear girl, don't be fanciful,' he answered. 'It isn't material whether they like you or not. The question is whether they will be too much for your patience. I know they are trying, for they have had endless tutors and governesses. Next year I am going to send the boys to Harrow, and Nan to Dresden. But in the meantime I shall be glad if you will make the best of them.'

Delia said nothing. But in her heart she resolved that she would make the best of them. And also, that if her husband permitted, she would take the reins of household government into her own hands. For even her inexperience of the routine of a large household told her that everything was, as Carstairs had said, at sixes and sevens ; and—fresh from up-to-date hotel cooking—she could hardly have avoided seeing that the dinner had been badly served and badly cooked, and wanting in many minor details besides. She made up her mind that she would show her husband that she could keep house, even if she were from a worldly

point of view the child he always seemed to consider her.

On the following morning she rose early, and went out. It was a glorious day, clear and bright, and almost as warm as June.

Garrioch Towers stood on a thickly-wooded slope facing the river. It had originally been an ancient monastery, and had been added to and improved by successive owners until it was now a rambling pile of no particular date and no particular style.

The grounds and gardens were beautiful; and as Delia strolled on in the crisp freshness of the early morning air, a certain elation took possession of her in realizing that she was the mistress of this fair and far-reaching domain.

She had just turned down a steep gravelled path leading to the river, and bordered with box and prim autumn flowers, when a large and exceedingly ugly fox terrier squeezed through the sweet-briar hedge on her right, and barked rudely. Then he seemed to change his mind, and after sniffing exhaustively at her shoes, pushed a cold nose into her hand, and passed his tongue in a swift and conciliatory manner over her fingers. She stooped and patted his rough head, then pulled his ragged ears. And thus Nipper and she made friends. And Nipper, let me tell you, was a power to be reckoned with at Garrioch. He followed her down to the river's edge, and evidently elected himself her protector and cicerone.

A little way along the bank she met the two boys, who pulled off their caps hastily, and were passing on with a muttered 'good-morning,' when Delia stopped them.

'Are you going for a walk?' she said. 'And if you are, may I come with you?'

She looked so young and wistful, so altogether unlike the dreaded stepmother, that Jock said gruffly:

'I don't mind.'

'And I'm sure I don't,' added Bob in a surprisingly gracious tone. 'Perhaps you'd like to see round the place a bit. It's not much after seven, and you won't get any breakfast until eight.'

'Yes, I should like it very much,' said Delia.

'The grass is a bit wet,' observed Jock, glancing with manly scorn at the somewhat inadequate patent leather shoes revealed by his stepmother's short serge skirt.

'Is it?' she said dubiously. 'But can't we keep to the walks?'

The young men's faces expressed polite though barely-veiled contempt.

'If you like we can, of course,' replied Bob. 'But it'll be pretty slow.'

'Well, I don't want to get my feet soaked,' laughed the young and (at that moment) naughty-looking Mrs. Carstairs.

'Why do you wear shoes like that out of doors?' asked Jock judicially. 'I wonder the governor lets you.'

'He doesn't lay down rules about my attire,' said Delia. 'He thinks I'm old enough to see to that for myself.'

'You don't look very old,' returned Bob, gazing at her with grudging admiration. 'You don't look so very much older than our sister Nan.'

'Where are your sisters?' she inquired. 'Aren't they up yet?'

'Up!' the Masters Carstairs echoed derisively. 'Why, we've all been up for more than an hour. We've had our first breakfast. We have the second at eight, with the governor. Now, what would you like to see?'

'Well, what is there to see?' she asked.

'Why, there's everything to see,' she was told in somewhat lofty tones. 'There's the ferrets and rabbits, and the stables. And there's the landslip on the other side of the ghyll. It's rather fun climbing up there, because you never know when the next slip will be. And there's the Kelpie's Cave, just below the mill. And there's the boat. She's a bit leaky, so we have to take it in turns to bail her out. And there's the well in the west plantation, with a queer old frog that Nan says is a hundred years old. Perhaps, as you're a girl, you'd like to see that.'

'Yes, I think I should like the frog and the well,' said Delia, after due consideration. 'I once had a pet frog at home. It knew me quite well, and used to come when I called it.'

'All right, come on,' said Bob briskly, while Jock looked rather ostentatiously at a queer old turnip of a watch he kept in his trousers' pocket, it being too large for those of his waistcoat.

And all three proceeded at a smart pace through a shady, well-stocked kitchen-garden, along a path between rows of fruit trees, and up a winding track leading to the gardeners' cottages. Near the top of this track, a crooked side-path led to the 'Frog's Well,' the dark entrance to which was overhung with delicate ferns and long grasses.

'Now hush!' said Jock authoritatively, 'or the silly old frog won't come out.'

When a few minutes had passed, and the frog had made no sign, Bob, becoming impatient, leaned too far round the edge of the wall, and fell plump into the water.

Nipper barked joyously. Jock, leaning against a tree with his hands in his pockets, took no notice.

With a suppressed cry, Delia rushed forward to the mouth of the well. But Jock caught her arm and held her firmly back.

'What are you going to do?' he asked coolly.

'He'll be drowned!' she cried out in a terrified voice. 'Someone must help him.'

'Pooh! he won't be drowned,' was the nonchalant answer. 'Don't you think it.'

And as he spoke Bob clambered in a leisurely fashion out of the aperture, and shook himself vigorously.

'Oh, Bob!' gasped his stepmother, 'how wet you are!'

'Odd, isn't it?' he replied with cheerful satire. 'And just after having been in the water, too.'

And the speaker rubbed his face and hair sturdily with a far from clean pocket-handkerchief.

'I say, how scared you look,' he continued, giving himself a final shake. 'I'm all right. Why, Jock and I often fall into that well. It's such a beastly awkward shape.'

Here a series of piercing 'coo-ees' rang through the air, followed by the appearance of Nan, with Lulu trotting in the rear.

'Jock and Bob,' she called out excitedly, when she was within speaking distance, 'there's an enormous rat in the stable-yard, in an old barrel. And Jerry says——'

But before she could complete her sentence the boys and Nipper were off like rockets.

'Oh, good-morning, Mrs. Carstairs,' Nan said in a prim little voice, singularly unlike her recent stentorian tones.

'Dood-morning, Mrs. Carstairs,' echoed Lulu, hanging back from Delia's shyly-proffered kiss.

'Please don't call me Mrs. Carstairs,' said Delia 'Suppose you just call me Delia.'

Nan shook her head.

'I don't suppose father would like it,' she answered with an awkward hunch of her shoulders.

'Don't suppose father would like it,' supple-

mented Lulu, who had been sidling nearer and nearer to Delia, and now took her hand. 'But I would like it. So will just call you Mumsey. Can kiss me now if you like.'

'I'm so afraid Bob will take cold,' Delia said, when she had returned Lulu's proffered salute. 'He fell into the well. He must be soaking.'

'Oh, he'll be all right,' replied Nan easily. 'It isn't cold this morning. Why, we're all often wet through two or three times a day. By the way,' she added, 'perhaps you would have liked to see Nipper kill the rat?'

'Certainly not,' exclaimed Delia with a shudder. 'But don't let me keep you, if you want to go. I can find the way back to the house by myself.'

'No, I don't like it,' returned Nan, decidedly. 'But I promised the boys I would let them know if I saw that rat before they did. It's the biggest we've ever seen, and Nipper nearly caught it a week ago. I hate rats, of course, but it's horrid to see Nipper killing them.'

They walked slowly back to the house together, and the gong boomed out its summons to breakfast just as they were crossing the front lawn.

After breakfast Carstairs set off in the dog-cart to the works, which were a couple of miles away; the boys fell under the sway of a stern-looking tutor, who came on a bicycle about eleven; and Nan and Lulu prepared to spend an hour or two

in the company of a scared-looking daily governess. So Delia was left to her own devices.

She wandered about the grounds for some time, attended by Nipper, who, I may mention in passing, had acquitted himself nobly as far as the rat was concerned.

Delia noted that it was only within the interior of Garrioch Towers that neglect and confusion reigned. Outside the house, in stables, gardens, and orchards, all was in spick and span order—all that section of the establishment, in fact, that lay under masculine rule.

Of course, the new *châtelaine* did not discover all this on that first day. But she discovered a good deal.

When she had walked about until she was tired, she found her way to the housekeeper's room.

Mrs. Batty (or Batty, as she was familiarly called by the children and her master) had seen fit to approve of the new Mrs. Carstairs. And Batty's approval was something upon which to congratulate one's self. For she was, like many other faithful old servants, a trifle eccentric and *difficile*.

She offered to take Delia over the house, saying with a curious mixture of respect and condescension :

'I dare say the master would have taken you over it himself, ma'am, if he had not thought it his duty to see to the trouble at the works. For trouble there has been and will be. For my part

I don't altogether hold with being a slave to duty for it has a way (as you're too young to know, my dear—ma'am, I should say) of coming between one's self and most pleasant and easy things. And if one doesn't have an easy time in this world, the Lord only knows what may be prepared for us in the next. But the master always was dutiful, in a way, from the nursery up, I will say. And I ought to know for I was nurse before I was housekeeper. And if he went in for a good sound piece of mischief, he always got his lessons and such-like done in good time first, so as to enjoy his bad behaviour with an easy mind, in a way of speaking.'

Carstairs did not return until dinner-time, and Delia, inexperienced as she was in the ways of men, divined at once that he was both worried and out of temper.

The boys, evidently recognising well-known storm-signals, were preternaturally quiet. So was Nan. Only Lulu—who ought to have been in bed, and who perched beside Delia with a light repast of a biscuit and a glass of water—was blandly conversational as usual.

The meal was again undistinguished by any excellence of either cooking or serving. And Delia, who even in her aunts' small household, had been accustomed to a certain prim daintiness of régime, marvelled greatly that a man of her husband's refinement should submit to such glaringly slipshod management.

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After dinner, when the children had gone to bed, and Delia had had half an hour or so of seclusion in the big, rather cheerless drawing-room, she ventured to make her way to the library.

The door was closed ; and she knocked timidly.

'Come in,' said a preoccupied voice.

As his wife entered, Carstairs looked up from the pile of papers he was examining.

'You, Delia ?' he said. 'Do you want anything ? Can I do anything for you ?'

'No,' she answered nervously. 'But I thought —I fancied you looked worried. And I thought perhaps you would like to talk about it. But if you are busy, I can go away.'

He looked at her with a faintly amused smile.

'Do you think you would understand business worries ?' he said.

'I could try,' was the earnest answer. 'And I think I should like to. You have been so good to me, Don, since we were married. I should like to be of a little bit of use to you, if I might.'

He was absently balancing a paper-knife on his finger ; and obviously his thoughts were far away.

'You know,' she went on, as he did not speak, 'you said you were a little lonely. And perhaps, if you—if you would let me be a companion to you, Don——'

She stopped, and gazed attentively at her wedding-ring, which still felt new and strange.

He came to himself with a start.

'But you are a companion to me,' he assured her. 'A very dear sweet little companion—although, as you have more than once reminded me, I am twice your age. And now, my dear, if you really want to help me, I must ask you to run away, for I am very busy. I want to go over these papers to-night.'

'Can't I be of any use?' she asked wistfully.

'I'm afraid not. Indeed, to speak frankly, you will be a little bit of a hindrance.'

As he spoke, he glanced at his watch, and turned to the heap of papers again.

He was really very fond of his little wife. But he was not given to demonstrations of affection; and in the years since his first wife's death he had grown reserved and silent to an extent of which he himself was hardly aware. It was this reserve, coupled with a certain intermittent moodiness, that had alienated his children from him. Even Lulu, who was a loving little soul when her affection was once gained, had no caresses for her stern, unapproachable father. The boys feared him, though in many things they secretly admired and tried to imitate him. Nan loved him fiercely, but was too proud to show it.

This phase of his character was comparatively unknown to his young wife. For during the lazy days of his honeymoon he had been, like most bridegrooms, at his best. But now he was back in the work-a-day world again, and to-night he seemed to Delia almost like a stranger.

Deeply hurt and mortified, Delia went slowly out of the room. And on the dimly-lit stairs she found Nan, sitting bunched up with her hands clasped round her knees, as if waiting for her.

'You're crying!' said the child, jumping up and catching at her stepmother's skirt as she passed.

Delia put an arm round the thin young shoulders.

'No, dear,' she said. 'I am not crying——'

'But your eyes are full of tears,' persisted Nan. 'I can see them. I know. I saw you coming out of the library. I suppose father's been cross to you, or at least he's been making you feel he'd be jolly glad if you went away and left him alone. Now, hasn't he?'

Delia did not answer. There was a comforting sense of companionship in this roughly-offered sympathy.

The two young things—for there were barely five years between them—went slowly up the broad staircase together, and along the corridor until they reached Delia's dressing-room.

It looked cosy and homelike, and a cheerful fire flashed a ruddy welcome.

'May I come in for a little while?' asked Nan as she paused at the door.

'Yes, certainly, dear, if you wish it,' Delia answered.

As a matter of fact, she would rather have been alone. But this opportunity of making friends with

one of the stepchildren whose hostility she had dreaded was not to be missed.

'Let us sit on the hearthrug,' suggested Nan. 'Do. You look such a dear. Not a bit proper or superior, as we were afraid you would be. Even the boys say you're not half bad. And that's a good deal for them.'

Delia had no objection to sitting on the hearthrug—quite the contrary. And Nan, curled up in the fashion that appeared to be her favourite attitude, was soon chattering away with the frankness that is so characteristic of youth.

'It did seem awfully queer at first to find that you weren't a bit old,' she said, shaking her untidy hair well over her face. 'Because father, you know—well, we thought he would be certain to have married someone about as old as himself. But I don't wonder he wanted to marry you. You're just like a girl in a picture I have in my room. I'll show it to you to-morrow. I suppose—but, of course, I mustn't ask that,' she broke off abruptly.

'You can ask anything you like, Nan dear,' Delia answered, surveying the speaker's wistful sallow little face with dawning affection.

'Well, I was going to say—I suppose you weren't in love with father, were you? I have a kind of feeling, you know, that you weren't.'

Delia gazed into the fire silently for a few moments. Then she said quietly:

'No—I wasn't.'

'And yet, you know,' went on Nan, 'I think he's awfully nice-looking. Don't you?'

'Yes.'

'And sometimes—not often—but when he smiles—I feel as if I could just do anything for him,' burst out poor Nan passionately. 'But generally, he doesn't take a bit of notice of any of us, and never seems even to know we are there. I don't think he cares for anybody or anything much. I suppose he must have been fond of mother—but I don't know. And I suppose he must like you, or he wouldn't have married you.'

A queer little pain stole through Delia's heart.

'I'm awfully glad you've come,' went on Nan dreamily, when she said good-night a couple of hours later. 'Because after Christmas the boys are going to a public school; and I'll only have Lulu. But if you and I get to be friends, it'll be lovely.'

'I hope we shall be friends,' said Delia, clasping the girl to her in an impulsive hug.

'Oh, I say, here's father!' Nan exclaimed suddenly.

And as Carstairs entered the room, she fled along the corridor to her own quarters.

Chapter VIII

BEFORE a week had passed, Delia had made an undoubted conquest of Batty; and the happy inspiration came to her to confide in that worthy that she was desirous of learning housekeeping. Would Batty be her teacher? The old woman was immensely flattered, and promised to teach artful Delia all she knew. And the second Mrs. Carstairs smiled naughtily in her sleeve, and laid plans for the coming campaign.

When Delia had been about a week at Garrioch, the neighbours began to call. The opinions on the bride were many and various; but for the most part they were favourable. Mrs. Darracott, who had three daughters all verging towards middle-age, thought Delia very sweet, but absurdly young. For the Misses Darracott had long had their respective eyes on the master of Garrioch Towers. These maidens themselves confided to one another that Mrs. Carstairs was nice-looking enough, but 'designing.' Sir George and Lady Whittingham fell in love with her at once.

The Vicar was among the earlier visitors, but

Delia had been 'on view' nearly a fortnight before his wife made her appearance.

Mrs. Vansittart was one of those furtive-looking, pink-eyed women, who irresistibly remind one of ferrets, and rats, and other rodents. Her mouth as well as her nose protruded sharply from her thin narrow face, and her chin was really a vanishing point. Her hair was of that veritably sandy shade which is seen so seldom, and when it is seen, is so indescribably ugly. Her voice exactly matched the rest of her. And most people winced, perceptibly or otherwise, when they heard it.

If Mrs. Vansittart had moved in London's orbit, she would have strained every nerve to get into the circle called by outsiders the 'smart set.' As it was, her fixed idea was to ingratiate herself with such of the county families as came within her radius. She 'took in' all the society papers she could afford, and gloated over the morsels of 'fashionable intelligence' which told, among other things, how 'Mrs. Tommie Grant wore an exquisite confection of, etc., etc., trimmed lavishly with priceless, etc., etc., and ropes of matchless pearls twined in her luxuriant hair.' Or how 'Mrs. Appleton Whirlby had given a charming dance in her princely mansion in Queen's Gate, which was largely attended by all the prettiest *débutantes* and most of the dancing men in town.' Or how 'the lovely daughter of Lord Fencillon had been married to the hero of a hundred fights, Major Gopsley, and

the service had been fully choral, and the presents numerous and costly.'

These thrilling items of news afforded her the most extraordinary pleasure; and her dearest dream was that she should one day form the subject of one of these paragraphs in the 'society notes' of the leading feminine journals. She imagined an announcement something after this fashion:

'The charming and distinguished-looking Mrs. Vansittart gave a most successful garden-party on Thursday last at her home, the lovely old Vicarage in the parish of Garrioch. Among the guests we noted, from time to time, most of the principal members of the British peerage. Refreshments were served in unique-looking little tents dotted about the grounds,' etc., etc., etc.

The Vansittarts had one child, an irrepressible little boy of eight, or thereabouts. He was rather a terrible young person; and the whole parish knew and feared him, and trembled when he took his walks abroad. Innumerable were the tales of his pranks and practical jokes; and his mother as seldom as possible let him out of her sight, very wisely dreading what line of procedure might occur to him when out of the range of her watchful maternal eye.

She had him in tow on the day of her first call on Delia, and the latter, in spite of his bad character, could not bring herself altogether to dislike the village scapegrace.

He was a very plain and stolid little boy, and yet there was something vaguely lovable about him.

During his mother's protracted visit he was seated on an ottoman in the middle of the room, swinging his stout young legs vigorously to and fro, and glaring moodily into space. Until tea came upon the scene, his hands were thrust defiantly into the pockets of his knickerbockers. Then he brightened up, and sat with his hands upon his knees, awaiting events.

Delia, after dispensing tea and cake, endeavoured to make friends with the uncompromising Sammy, who received her advances with unsmiling indifference, devoured appalling quantities of cake, and ever and anon silently handed his cup for more tea.

Mrs. Vansittart kept up an even flow of chatter, which went on and on until it seemed in Delia's ears like a continuous hum requiring no answer.

Therefore she only smiled and bowed at intervals; and now and again interpolated a polite, 'Indeed?' 'Really!' 'Oh no!' 'Yes, I suppose so,' etc.

'Of course, it is very pleasant, dear Mrs. Carstairs, having you among us; and, of course, I should have called long before now if it hadn't been for parochial business. Sammy, do cease swinging your legs! Coming from town, of course, Garrioch must feel rather dull for you. But we must try to make things hum a bit. Dreadful slang, is it not? But as dear Lady Clanwilkey was saying to me the other

day, it is so much used nowadays. Of course, this is a very one-horse place. Sammy, your face is all smeared with jam! What *will* Mrs. Carstairs think of you? Oh, naughty boy! But you *must* care what people think of you! However, we do manage to have a little fun now and then. Of course, as the Vicar's wife, I am in a very conspicuous position—Sammy, you cannot possibly eat and drink at the same time!—and so much social entertaining devolves on me. But one must brace one's self up for these efforts. I suppose your life in town was one perpetual whirl, dear Mrs. Carstairs?'

'No, indeed,' answered Delia. 'My aunts and I lived very quietly.'

'Really? You surprise me. Sammy, don't kick your feet against the legs of the ottoman. I had quite supposed that life with you was a rush, simply a rush. Society is such an octopus.'

Delia smiled.

'It may be,' she answered. 'But I was not in London society at all.'

'Dear me! Is that so?' exclaimed Mrs. Vansittart with raised eyebrows. 'I can hardly credit it. You look so—so—well, really, quite the London product. But I'm afraid you are chaffing me. By the way, of course, you have been presented? So much more friendly and genial and cosy, the evening royal receptions, than those dreadful two o'clock in the afternoon affairs. Don't you agree with me?'

'I really don't know,' answered Delia simply. 'I have never been presented.'

'No? Well, curiously enough, neither have I—Sammy, don't put out your tongue. It's exceedingly vulgar, as I've told you until I'm tired. But of course, you *will* be presented, dear Mrs. Carstairs? Society expects it, in a way. As I have said, I have not, *personally*, made my curtsey to my sovereign. My dear late father's means did not permit it, and, of course, since my marriage to Mr. Vansittart, well—you understand. But still I have the loyal feeling, and, after all, feeling is the main thing. I have no doubt my dear sovereign knows and understands—Sammy, that dog will bite you in a minute—and so I am content. I don't mind confessing to you, however, my dear young lady, that I am thrown away here—simply thrown away. I had looked forward to a ver-y different career from that of the wife of a country vicar—There, Sammy, I knew you'd choke yourself at last. What a tiresome badly-behaved boy you are!'

'I haven't choked myself,' muttered Sammy, with a savage glare. 'It's only a crumb in my throat.'

Mrs. Vansittart rose.

'Well, my dear Mrs. Carstairs, I have paid you a positive visitation. I really must go. My duties are never-ending. A vicar's wife has no bed of roses, I can assure you. Come over and see me soon. Will you? I am usually at home on Fridays——'

'I don't want to go home yet,' growled Sammy

suddenly. 'I want to wait till Jock and Bob come in.'

'They have gone up to the woods,' said Delia. 'Shouldn't you like to go and find them?'

'She won't let me,' he answered, jerking his head in the direction of his mother—to whom, by the way, he always alluded as 'she.' 'I've got my visiting clothes on. I'd be sure to spilt them, or something.'

'Well, you'll come and spend the day to-morrow, won't you, dear?' said Delia affectionately.

For she felt sorry for this small transgressor.

'I was coming to-morrow, anyway,' was the ungracious answer. 'I come most days.'

When her visitors had gone, Delia put on her hat and coat, and went for a brisk walk.

All day she had felt depressed, and singularly down-hearted, and the still gloom of the November afternoon accentuated her depression.

And yet, why should she be depressed, she asked herself resentfully? Had she not escaped from the humdrum life she detested? Was she not the wife of the man she admired and looked up to more than anyone in her world? Why did she feel restless and dissatisfied? What did she want?

She crossed the little bridge over the ghyll, and took the path towards the woods. The boys were nowhere to be seen—or heard; and she sat down on the trunk of a fallen tree, and resumed her melancholy self-catechism.

'Why am I not happy?' she whispered in the

fast-darkening silence. 'What is it? Surely I must be naturally discontented and wicked. Don is very kind to me—very, very, kind. Surely I did not expect anything more. And yet—oh, I am lonely, so lonely.'

She sat there for some time, stirring the dead leaves with one foot, so that they rustled drearily. Then she rose, and walked swiftly along the path that wound in and out among the faintly-sighing trees.

Yes, Don had been very kind and good to her while they were on their wedding-journey, and he was kind and good to her still. But she had a growing conviction that he often forgot all about her. She hated the thought of that mysterious region known as 'the works' that seemed to swallow him up so completely. He had told her he was lonely, and given her to understand that by his marriage with her he would be less lonely. And she—little fool, as she told herself savagely—had thought she might be a help to him.

Then her cheeks burned painfully as she remembered with passionate self-contempt, that she had practically been responsible for Don's asking her to marry him. She remembered that he had distinctly told her he was not in love with her. And at the time she had been glad. But now—— her eyes filled with burning tears. For alas! she was not modern enough to know that tears, with other exhibitions of genuine feeling, have entirely gone out of fashion.

Well, in any case, she would go on bravely with her attempts to guide dear funny old Batty in her erratic, happy-go-lucky mode of housekeeping. Perhaps, if Don saw that she really could make an efficient head of his household, he might, in time, treat her less as a child and a plaything, and more as a woman—the woman he had made his wife.

At this point in her musings she became aware that it had become much darker; and further, that she had undoubtedly lost her way. Without noticing, she had strayed away from the winding path, and now found herself against a low, moss-grown wall, which, as a matter of fact, formed the northern boundary of the wood.

She stopped, and listened.

It seemed to her that the silence was almost uncanny—only broken now and then by the whirr and hum of such insects as steal abroad while the autumn nights yet lack the sting of winter.

Now and then a busy, bustling squirrel jerked himself through the crisp, rustling leaves, seized a nut, bounded to the ground, scraped a hole, and dropping the nut in, bustled off again.

In the near distance, on the other side of the wall, Delia could discern awe-inspiring horned cattle. One huge animal wandered nearer; the terrified town-bred watcher could hear its deep breathing as it cropped the scanty herbage.

The wall was low; the cow, or bull—or whatever

it might be—loomed gruesomely large in the uncertain light.

With a thumping heart, Delia gathered up her skirts and ran.

When at last she stopped, out of breath, she found with dismay that she was in the midst of a thicket of blackberry bushes, that her skirts were held by countless clinging, thorny branches, and that she could hardly see a yard before her.

To complete her discomfiture, she heard heavy footsteps crashing through the brushwood to her left.

A cold terror seized her. What if it should be some tramp ? Involuntarily she slipped her beloved diamond ring round her finger, so that the stones were in the inside of her ungloved hand, and crouched into as small a space as possible.

The sound of footsteps came nearer, and presently she could distinguish the outline of a man's tall figure tramping at a tremendous pace between the irregular trunks of the trees.

But surely there was something familiar about the square set of the supposed tramp's shoulders ?

' Don,' she cried in a wavering voice. ' Don !'

Then her heart seemed to leap to her throat. What if it should not be Don, after all ?

It was Carstairs, however, and he stopped short in somewhat bewildered fashion.

' Who is it ?' he called out sharply. ' Did anyone call ?'

'Oh, Don, it's me!' Delia answered joyfully if grammarlessly. 'Please come.'

'But where are you, child?' he said, glancing keenly here and there in the gloom.

'I believe I'm in a blackberry bush, or a hundred blackberry bushes,' she laughed ruefully.

'All right, I see you,' he answered. 'Stand still. You foolish child, what on earth are you doing here after dusk? You might have wandered about for hours.'

As he spoke he made his way to her, and deftly set her free from the blackberry bushes' too insistent caresses.

'I lost my way,' she said, feeling strangely happy as he drew her arm through his, and led her back to the path, which, after all, was not so very far away. 'But how did you find me, Don?'

'I often cut through the woods when I am coming from the home farm, as I did to-night.'

'I thought you were at the works?'

'So I was. But I took the farm on my way home. Russell has been ill, and I called round to see how he was. Why, you are trembling, child! Are you cold?'

'No. But I was just a little bit frightened.'

'Poor little woman!'

His voice sounded tender—just as it used to do on their wedding-journey.

She clung to him more closely. After all, she said to herself defiantly, why should she not? He

was her husband, her own dear husband. And she had a right to like to be near him whether he cared for her or not. He was so big and strong and manly. Any woman must love him, it seemed to her. And if he did not love her as other men love their wives, at least he did not love anyone else.

At the exit from the wood there was a stile, and as Carstairs lifted her over, he held her for a second or two in his arms, and kissed her lightly on the lips.

'Are you happy, little wife?' he whispered.

She did not answer; and he repeated his question with a somewhat anxious inflection in his deep voice.

She hid her face on his arm in the darkness.

'No, Don,' she said under her breath, 'I am not happy.'

'Not happy!' he repeated, drawing her a little closer to him. 'But why, child? I don't understand. Have I failed in any way? Is there anything I can do——'

But she interrupted him.

'No, no,' she murmured. 'It is not anything that you can help. At least, I suppose it isn't.'

'Then what is it? Dear, tell me.'

'You treat me like a baby, a doll,' she said, her voice trembling. 'You seem to think I couldn't understand the things that worry you—the things that made you hurry home from Germany. And I thought I might perhaps be such a help to you.

But you won't let me. And you are often so silent —so cold. You make me afraid.'

There was a silence. For Carstairs was too amazed to speak.

Then Delia went on passionately:

'I have never even seen that horrible place you call the works, where you spend so much of your time. I know nothing about your life, your affairs. You wrap yourself up in a dreadful wall of silence, and you make me nervous and afraid of you, just as the children are afraid of you.'

Still Carstairs did not speak.

'Of course, I know you do not love me,' went on the childish, despairing voice. 'It is my own fault. I made you marry me. At least, I said things that put it into your mind, though I didn't mean to. And now you are sorry you married me, and you find me a worry and a trouble, as I said you would.'

She could not see his face in the darkness. But his voice had a strange note in it as he said quietly:

'And you, Delia? Are you sorry you married me?'

'Ah, no, no, *no!*' she cried, breaking into a storm of sobs. 'You know I am not.'

'Hush, hush,' he said soothingly. 'You are tired and cold, and don't know what you are talking about. You are my own little wife, and I couldn't do without you. So don't talk nonsense. And if you wish it so much, you shall drive over to the works with me one day soon, and ask questions about everything.'

As he spoke he kissed her again, almost as if he had loved her. Almost. But she knew the difference. Nevertheless, she felt cheered and comforted.

'Don,' she said shyly, as she tripped along by his side in the murky November gloom, 'did you really mean what you said just now—that you couldn't do without me? Am I truly something in your life?'

'I should be very sorry to have to do without you, you strange, fanciful little sprite. You know, dear, I am not a man of eloquent speech at any time. And, as you know, love and romance were pretty well over for me—such as they were—before I ever saw you. But I have a very true affection for you, my wee wife, and if I hurt or vex you in any way, by seeming neglectful or indifferent, you must tell me. I suppose I've got into queer, silent ways all these years, and into the habit of keeping my troubles and worries to myself.'

'Ah, but don't!' she said pleadingly, giving his arm a little squeeze. 'You don't know how I should love to think I could ever help or comfort you if you were vexed or troubled.'

They had now emerged upon the east lawn, and the lights of the house were in view.

'Very well, child,' he answered. 'Only don't fret, and make yourself miserable. God knows I would do anything to make you happy.'

That night, after the children, with the usual grumbling protests, had been despatched to bed,

Carstairs came into the drawing-room, where Delia was sitting close to the fire, talking in a low voice to Nipper.

'Will you come down to the library, Delia?' he said. 'I want you to do something for me.'

She sprang up with dancing eyes.

'Really?' she said, looking up eagerly into his grave, kind face. 'Really and truly? You are not just making it up because I was a goose in the wood?'

'No, honour bright. I want you to look through a pile of newspapers and find an article marked in blue pencil relating to pneumatic tubes. It doesn't sound very interesting, but I want to enclose it in a letter to be sent off by the first post in the morning.'

There was something almost pathetic in the girl's absorbed air of importance, as she diligently proceeded with her task, while her husband alternately wrote letters and walked up and down the room. And when at last the article was found, cut out, and enclosed in the envelope, she said eagerly:

'Now, isn't there anything else I can do?'

'No, thank you, dear. I don't, as a rule, work at home, you know. I like to keep business to business hours. But with my being so long away, and with this disturbance among the men, things have got rather ahead of me.'

'Is the trouble at the works all over now?' she asked.

'Pretty well over, I think.'

She looked very sweet, and absurdly young, as she stood looking down at him, her hand leaning lightly on the back of his chair.

A sudden wave of tenderness towards her youth and innocence swept over him, and with a murmured word or two, he drew her down on to his knee.

'What an infant you look! What an infant you are!' he said, stroking her rebellious hair. 'I had no business to marry you. You ought to be in the nursery still.'

'Ah, don't, Don dear,' she said earnestly. 'Don't speak to me and look at me as if I were nothing but a child. It—it hurts me, somehow. I seem to have been a child for such a long weary while. Help me to be a woman, and to leave my empty, meaningless childhood behind me.'

'Ah, you foolish girl,' he answered, 'when you are as old as I am, you will not think it so desirable to have said good-bye to your youth.'

'Why, Don, anyone would think you were as old as the hills!' she exclaimed, leaning her soft, young face against his. 'You don't look in the least old. And,' she added shyly, 'I think you have the dearest kindest face in all the world. And the aunts think you are very good-looking indeed. I know they do, because I have heard them say so.'

'Then the question is settled beyond dispute,' he answered laughing.

After she had gone up to bed, he sat smoking and musing for about an hour.

'Poor little lassie!' he thought, as he knocked the ashes out of his pipe. 'Poor little lassie! I'm afraid I made a hash of it after all. So much for playing amateur Providence. Perhaps I'd better have left her until the right man came along. And yet——'

Somehow the thought of 'the right man' was curiously repugnant to him.

Then he smoked another pipe, put out the lights and went to bed.

Chapter IX

On the following afternoon Delia had another visitor, a tiny, bright-eyed old lady, who came in a small, light basket-carriage, drawn by an extremely fat and lazy-looking pony.

'It's Miss Wedgwood,' proclaimed Nan, who was sitting at the end window of the drawing-room, and thus commanded a view of the avenue. 'She's an awfully queer old stick. She was quite poor until about a year ago, and lived in rooms above the Post-Office. Then someone left her a legacy. So she bought Teviot Cottage, at the end of the Sellor's Lane. Some people say she's mad. And I believe she is, poor old soul.'

A few minutes later Miss Wedgwood was announced, and bustled in, as one who has not a moment to spare.

'Dear Mrs. Carstairs,' she said, in a chirpy yet plaintive voice like a bird's, 'I am so glad to be able to come to see you at last. I have known dear Donald since he was a boy, and naturally take an interest in his wives. You are very young, dear, very young. But there, we were all young once.

Even I, my dear, even I. I know you will forgive my not having called on you until now. You see my time is so much taken up. Even as it is, I can only spare a few minutes.'

'But you will have time to have a cup of tea with me, wont you ?' said Delia coaxingly.

'Well, I must just gulp it down, then,' answered the little old lady, screwing up her eyes to peer at the large, old-fashioned watch that hung from her waist-belt. 'Thanks, no sugar. Well, yes, I will have a piece of cake. I have been so looking forward to seeing you. The vicar told me you were young and pretty. Nay, you need not blush, my dear. It is nothing to be ashamed of, surely, to have a comely countenance. I never had. The Lord decreed otherwise, and many a bitter tear I shed in consequence. And I was poor too. It is bad enough to be poor, and bad enough to be plain. But to be plain and poor at one and the same time is more than any woman ought to be called upon to bear. However, Providence relented at last, and saw fit to send me an unexpected legacy about a year ago. And now I am as happy as anyone with my brief life-limit may dare to be. The only fear I have is that I may not have time to finish them all.'

'Ah, but I hope you will,' said Delia in her caressing young voice. 'Is it some work you have in hand ?'

Miss Wedgwood looked at her watch again, then drew her chair confidentially near to her hostess's.

'I will tell you,' she said, laying one hand on the girl's arm. I am sure you won't laugh, as some people do. You see, all my life I have been worn and harassed by the cares and makeshifts of poverty. I daresay I worried about them more than I ought to have done. And I'm afraid I envied girls who were comfortably off, and those who were pretty and had lovers. I never had a lover, my dear. I don't mind confessing it now. But I never had even the faintest approach to a love-affair. Indeed, owing to my always having been plain and undersized, I was always very diffident in the company of the other sex, and never knew how to converse with them. Nor, indeed, did they show any desire to converse with me. But we all have our ambitions, small or great; and I always thought that if I ever became even comparatively rich, I should like to possess—what do you think?'

Delia shook her head.

'I could never guess,' she answered.

The old lady nodded triumphantly.

'I thought not,' she said, with a queer little crow of delight. 'Well, my ambition was to possess all the bound back numbers of *Punch*, from the very beginning. So when a happy chance wiped out my poverty for ever, I carried out that wish. Oh, what a shock it was, my dear—the news of the legacy, I mean. If I had not had an exceptionally strong brain, I feel sure I should have gone mad. All that night my head seemed on fire, and I could hardly

refrain from throwing up the window and shrieking out loud. But that passed, and I tried to remember all the luxuries I used to long for when I was poor. But when I came to think matters over, I found that the only thing I imperatively wanted was the complete set of *Punch* I have told you of. So I advertised, and by great good fortune found a gentlewoman in reduced circumstances who wanted to part with her set. Wasn't it wonderful ?'

'Yes, very,' said Delia, in a curiously gentle voice.

'Well, then, of course,' went on Miss Wedgwood cheerfully, 'I had to buy a house. One could not keep valuable volumes like that in lodgings. So I bought Teviot Cottage just as it stands, furniture and all. It is a comfortable house, and the furniture is old and quaint. And so I am very content. You see, my lack of beauty does not matter now, because I am only an old woman. And,' she added in a lower tone, 'I pretend to myself that long ago I had a lover, who thought me beautiful, and who is dead. Does that seem very foolish to you, my dear ?'

'No,' Delia answered softly, as she took Miss Wedgwood's hand, and pressed it against her own soft young cheek, 'not in the very least.'

'Ah, you have sweet, loving ways, dear child,' said the old lady, patting the girl affectionately on the shoulder. 'However, as I have said, my only worry now is that I may not have time to read and examine all the volumes. Fancy, my dear, between three or four thousand weeks, they run to ! I can

tell you, I even grudge the time I spend in bed. Of course, I do not retire until about eleven, and I get up fairly early. Then I have to hurry over meals, for they are not books to hold at meal-times. Dear, dear, how I have laughed over them! I feel quite weak sometimes.'

Delia looked at the frail old creature with a strange pitying light in her clear young eyes.

'They must be very amusing,' she said gently.

'And do you really think I shall have time?' queried Miss Wedgwood, with a wistful note in her pathetic old voice.

'Yes, I think so,' the girl answered. 'I am sure of it.'

'Thank you, my dear, thank you,' said the old lady, standing on tiptoe to kiss her tall young hostess. 'So many people laugh at me and my beloved *Punch* volumes. Indeed, some of them think I am mad! Think of that! Mad—a woman with my brain!'

And she laughed shrilly.

Delia bent down and took her in her arms. And as she did so, her eyes were dim with unshed tears.

'You must come and see me one day, my dear,' said the visitor, as she moved briskly towards the door. 'But let me know a day or two beforehand. Then I can sit up later for a few nights before you come, to make up the time. Good-bye, my dear. Give my love to Donald. He is a dear good fellow, Donald. I remember him a baby in his bath. He

never laughs about the *Punch* volumes. He says he would have done precisely the same himself.'

Delia watched her get into the pony-carriage, which soon disappeared round a bend in the avenue.

'Poor old thing!' she murmured. 'Dear old thing!'

'Isn't she a caution?' said Nan, who had effaced herself behind a curtain during the greater part of the above conversation. 'She really is a bit cracked, you know. Even father thinks so. They say the shock of her legacy turned her brain. And Batty told me that sometimes when people are passing Teviot Cottage late at night, they can hear her just yelling with laughter at the jokes in her queer old books. She hardly ever goes anywhere, in case she shouldn't have time to read them all before she dies. She wouldn't have come here, only she is awfully fond of father. Most people are, you know,' she added thoughtfully.

'Yes, I dare say,' answered her stepmother.

'I almost wonder, you know,' Nan went on, 'that you're not in love with him. But perhaps you will be, some day.'

A slow, brilliant blush illuminated Delia's face, as she remembered her husband's tender words and caresses in the dusk-darkened wood.

Life was very good, after all. She was healthy, and young, and not uncomely. And—and she was Donald Carstairs' wife, and the memory of his kisses lingered on her lips.

Nan watched her curiously.

'Why, Mumsey!' she exclaimed softly, 'I believe you are in love with him now.'

Her stepmother's eyes flashed.

'You forget yourself, Nan,' she said, her voice cold and distant. 'You have no right to——'

But further speech was choked by Nan's arms round her neck, Nan's lips on hers.

'Ah, you dear, dear little Mumsey,' the child murmured, 'don't be vexed with me! I love you, I love you! And I'm going to be horribly, unnaturally good, for ever and ever, just to please you. I love father, too. But—but he won't let me. So you and me'll just make it up to each other.'

Delia said nothing, only gave the little figure within her arms a loving squeeze, and went hastily out of the room.

After dinner that evening, Delia threw a shawl over her shoulders, and went out upon the terrace.

It was singularly mild for the time of year, and there was no wind; not a leaf stirred. Restless little winter moths flew erratically to and fro, now and then making a bold incursion into the lighted precincts of the drawing-room, now and then falling a prey to the relentless spiders who watched ceaselessly from the crevices of the close-growing ivy.

Far away across the fields came the intermittent cry of some night-bird; the skies were sown with thickly-blossoming stars.

Delia thought of Nan's loving words and embrace

with a warm glow at her heart. It was something to have gained the love of at least one of her step-children. And to-night even shy little Lulu had held up her face for a goodnight kiss. And shortly before dinner the boys had graciously invited her to inspect their own particular sanctum—a fearsome and noisome den where they skinned cats and rabbits, and blew birds' eggs, and enjoyed themselves generally after the lawless fashion of boyhood.

She had shuddered a little as she cautiously entered this weird holy of holies; but she had keenly appreciated the honour, which, as Nan informed her, had not, hitherto, been accorded to any member of the household save Nan herself—not even to Lulu.

Thus the day might be considered to have been a success all round.

Musing on these and other things, Delia turned the corner of the house, and paused at the foot of the broad flight of steps leading up to the library.

Carstairs stood just within the open window, lighting a cigarette. As he saw Delia, he stepped out.

'Warm—isn't it?' he said, as he threw away the match. 'Rather unlike November. Should you like to come for a turn? You won't catch cold, will you?'

As he spoke he came down the steps to where she stood, and drew her shawl higher up round her throat.

Without speaking she slipped her arm shyly through his; and they sauntered on in mutual

silence, through the thicket-like shubberies, across one of the lawns, and so to the path leading to the river, where Delia had first made the acquaintance of Nipper—who, indeed, was now skirting the hedge in search of field-mice, against which rodents he maintained an unceasing war.

As they neared the river Carstairs said abruptly:

'You said last night in the wood—do you remember?—that you were afraid of me, as my own children were afraid of me—or something like that. Did you mean it?—or were you only excited and not thinking what you were saying?'

Delia coloured and hesitated.

'I shouldn't have said it,' she answered in a low voice.

'But you meant it?' he persisted.

'Yes, Don. I truly am afraid of you, sometimes, when you are so cold and stern. And I know the children are. And yet—I think they would be very fond of you if you would let them.'

'I daresay I have neglected them, poor kiddies,' he said, somewhat remorsefully. 'But they're queer little souls. I don't half understand them. They seem to have taken to you. It is a great weight off my mind.'

'Yes, I think we shall be quite friendly in time,' she answered. 'I am very glad, because, you know, they might have resented my taking the place of their own mother. But I suppose they were perhaps too young to remember her very much.'

He did not answer. And presently Delia went on, speaking seemingly with an effort.

'Don't be offended at what I am going to say, Don——'

She paused uncertainly.

He looked down at her half-averted face and laughed, not altogether mirthfully.

'Am I really such an ogre in your eyes,' he said, 'as well as in my children's? Surely you may say anything you like to me. Have you forgotten that I am your husband, you foolish child?'

'I have often wanted to ask you,' she went on, still without looking at him, 'about—about your first wife. I mean,' she hastened to add, warned by a quick movement of the arm she held, 'if there were things she used to do that perhaps you would like me to do—in the way of helping you, or—or anything,' she concluded lamely somewhat.

He was silent for a second or two. Then he said slowly:

'Little girl—I may as well tell you—as a matter of fact, for a few years before her death, poor Anna and I did not pull together very well. It was my fault, I dare say. I don't think she was happy. Indeed, I know she was not.'

He paused for a second or two, then went on:

'It cut me, last night in the wood, when you said *you* weren't happy. For I suppose that is my fault too.'

The sadness in his voice touched her with remorse. She pressed his arm in eager penitence.

'Ah, but I am going to be happy,' she said. 'The children have all been so dear and sweet to me to-day. And perhaps some day I may learn how to be a companion to you. Anyhow, I am going to try.'

He laid his hand over hers as it lay on his arm.

'Dear little woman,' he said. 'How often must I tell you that I look on you as a companion now? I should miss you sorely if anything were to happen to you, which God forbid.'

They had left the river path, and were returning to the house by a circuitous route that led through the apple orchard. A pale moon hung above them, and in its vague misty light all things looked dream-like and uncertain.

After a silence Delia said:

'A dear old lady came to see me to-day—Miss Wedgwood. Poor old thing, I am so sorry for her.'

'You need not be,' her husband answered. 'She is happier than most people. She is a harmless monomaniac, as I dare say you have found out, whose horizon is bounded on the east by *Punch*, on the west by *Punch*, and on the north and the south by *Punch*. She wants nothing more.'

'Ah, but there is something so pathetic about her,' she said.

He stopped to light a cigarette.

'There is something pathetic about most people, my dear, if you look at them in certain lights. I thought there was something infinitely pathetic about you when I first saw you. I often think so now.'

'Yes, I know you did,' she answered quickly. 'That was why you married me.'

'Was it?' he said, pressing her arm a little more closely to his side as they walked on again. 'Well, perhaps it had something to do with it. And what about me? Ddin't I strike you as a bit pathetic in those days? I can tell you I was a lonely old fellow enough before you came into my life, little girl.'

Then he added in a low voice:

'You didn't really mean that you aren't happy, Delia?'

'I meant it then,' she answered truthfully. 'But perhaps it was only that I had a fit of the blues. I feel much happier now.'

'That's right. And remember, if anything vexes you or troubles you, you are to come to me about it. I know I am a morose old savage, often. But it is more habit than anything else. And who knows,' he added somewhat grimly, 'I may cease to inspire terror in my household as time goes on.'

Then in a different tone he continued:

'By the way, should you like to drive over with me to the works to-morrow? You can if you like.'

'I should love it,' she answered eagerly. 'May I really, Don?'

'Haven't I just said you may? I think you will find it more than a little of a bore, you know.'

'Oh no, I shan't. And you will explain everything to me, won't you?'

'Certainly. I'll come for you in the latter part

of the afternoon, then. I shall be rather busy in the morning. Now it's getting a bit chilly. We had better go indoors.'

It was a happy and important Delia who sat perched up in the dog-cart beside her husband on the following afternoon. It was quite a two miles' drive to the works, for Garrioch Towers was well out of the dirt and grime of Garrioch village. The latter was of a fair size, with one broad street known as the High Street bisecting it from end to end.

The men were pouring out of the gates of the factory. Other files of men met them, those who were going to work all night. Dust and gloom enveloped everything. Depressing rows of dark brick cottages blackened by the smoke from the factory's chimneys served as backgrounds for countless squads of uproarious children, and groups of untidy women.

Carstairs paid his men well, and at Christmas and midsummer was wont to give generous orders for comforts of all kinds for their wives and children. But, owing to his refusal to raise the wages five per cent, he was in bad odour in Garrioch at present, and frowns rather than smiles greeted his wife's wistful young face as she looked eagerly from side to side of the crowded street.

She was keenly interested in going over the works, and Carstairs was more than a little surprised at the intelligence and shrewdness of her questions.

'I shall have to engage you as my head clerk, I

think,' he said to her laughingly, when they had come back to his private office, and he had put her into a big leather chair.

'I wish I could be anything half so useful,' she sighed, stooping to stroke a cat of plump proportions, who blinked pompously at the fire.

As they passed out a tall burly workman hurried round a corner, and cannoning against Delia, sprang back with a muttered apology, but a lowering face.

'Confound you, look where you're going,' exclaimed Carstairs angrily.

But Delia impulsively laid a hand on the man's arm, and said in her gentle voice:

'Oh, it was my fault. I am so sorry. I hope I haven't hurt you.'

The man's face softened, and he wriggled awkwardly.

'Law, no, miss—leastways, ma'am,' he stammered, turning almost purple with embarrassment. 'Bless your pretty face, it would take more than that to hurt me, it would. I ask your pardon kindly. It was my blame.'

And with an extraordinary contortion of his features which was intended as a smile for Delia and a scowl for Carstairs, he lurched away. But a sudden loyalty to the 'boss's wife' had sprung up in his wild untutored heart, and was to bear significant fruit hereafter.

'Well, little one,' said Carstairs, as they drove

homeward under the November stars, 'you look very solemn. What are you thinking about?'

'I was thinking,' she answered slowly, 'that it must be a frightful responsibility to be the master of all these men—when one considers their wives and children. They must look upon you as a kind of god.'

He laughed.

'I wish they did,' he said shortly. 'I should perhaps have less trouble with them.'

'What is the trouble, Don?' she asked. 'What do they want?'

He touched up the mare smartly before he answered. Then he said in a curt voice:

'They want more pay and less work. As you may imagine, want is likely to be their master.'

She drew her level brows together.

'But, Don, I thought you said the trouble was over.'

'So it is, practically, for the time,' he answered, frowning a little. 'But it is smouldering. It may break out at any moment. However, you need not worry your little head over such questions. I fancy I am more than a match for them.'

She slipped her fingers into his.

'Would they—would they try to harm you?' she said under her breath. 'I have read and heard such terrible things about employers being shot at—or even stabbed to death. Oh, Don, do be careful.'

'Silly little thing,' he said, shifting the reins to

his other hand, and putting his arm round her in the friendly darkness, 'don't be afraid. How do you suppose I managed before you came into my life ?'

'Oh, I don't know. You see, you—you didn't belong to me then.'

The last words were barely audible. But Carstairs caught them ; and they gave him a curious sense of pleasure.

It was good to think that someone was concerned as to his safety. It seemed inconceivable, after all those lonely years. But he did not speak. As he had said, he was a man of few words at the best of times.

He only held her a little more closely to him.

And Delia felt curiously happy and content as the mare pounded on stolidly under the stars. She did not know why. It is best not to analyse our most uplifted moments. What is explained is often dispersed as well.

'Mumsey, you look just too sweet for anything to-night,' murmured Nan, as her stepmother came into the schoolroom just before going down to dinner. 'Your eyes are as bright as stars, and there is the dearest little pink colour in your cheeks. Did you like going over the works ?'

'Yes, very much. It was most interesting. But where is Lulu ?'

'She's been naughty,' said Bob sullenly. 'At least old Torpey says she has.'

'It's a low shame,' supplemented Jock, throwing an india-rubber ball towards the ceiling for Nipper to catch, which the latter did with praiseworthy dexterity.

'But where is she?' repeated Delia.

A mournful wail from a corner cupboard answered her. She flew towards it, and turned the key.

Whereupon Lulu was revealed (of course clasping her doll), a veritable figure of woe.

In a second Delia had her in her arms; and Lulu sobbed there contentedly.

'Who locked the poor child in that cupboard?' exclaimed Delia breathlessly.

'I did,' said a weak but excited voice. 'She would not attend to her lessons, and said she was tired and sleepy, and was altogether naughty. So I put her in the cupboard. And why not?'

Delia turned upon the speaker like a young fury.

'And how dare you?' she said, speaking in a low shaking tone that made the children stare. 'How dare you lock up a tiny child all alone in the dark? If it ever happens again I will ask my husband to dismiss you at once.'

Miss Torpey's small face became of a curious leaden hue, partly from fear, partly from suppressed rage.

And Delia swept out of the room with the sobbing Lulu in her arms, while the boys rolled on the floor in ecstatic applause.

Chapter X

As the weeks went on Delia artfully managed to introduce various changes and improvements into the haphazard household at Garrioch; and still more artfully led Batty to imagine that such changes and improvements had originated, not with her young mistress, but with herself. And not the least important of these *bouleversements* was the engaging of a new and competent cook.

Little by little, Carstairs became aware that his household was being run, not only more comfortably, but more economically as well.

'Do you know, I am beginning to think that besides being a remarkably clever little housekeeper, you are also a dangerously wily diplomatist,' he said one evening shortly before Christmas, as Delia sat curled up in an easy-chair in the library, sewing busily, while her husband smoked and read his paper.

Her face flushed with pleasure.

'Oh, Don, I am so glad,' she said. 'How did you find out?'

He laid down the paper, and lit another cigarette.

'I am not quite blind, my dear,' he answered. 'I have had experience of good old Batty and her methods for a considerable number of years, and I don't think the radical and satisfactory changes in the household régime are likely to have emanated from her. That is why I have come to think you are a good housekeeper. The reason I have come to respect you as a diplomatist is that you have evidently enrolled Batty as your slave and coadjutor. How did you manage it?'

'I don't know,' she answered, dimpling happily at his praise. 'I saw that you weren't quite—quite comfortable; and I knew that Batty would very naturally be up in arms if I tried to take the reins of government out of her hands. So I thought it would be wiser to ask her to teach me what she knew, and let me help her now and then in return for her teaching. And now she is quite pleased, and under the impression that she thought of all my artfully suggested improvements herself. Besides, I think she is fond of me, and would do almost anything to please me.'

'Strange!' said Carstairs with a lazy smile.

He was in a tranquil, after-dinner mood, and disposed to be more than usually affectionate to this winsome little girl, who was proving herself so capable of ordering his household.

'I suppose the next thing will be that you will want to turn me round your little finger too,' he said, watching her deftly guiding her needle in

and out of the intricate piece of fancy-work she held.

'I shouldn't be at all surprised,' she answered, glancing at him half shyly, half saucily from under her thick lashes. Then she added:

'I am glad you are pleased with me, Don.'

'My dear, I am not only pleased with you. I am very grateful to you. Also—I am rather proud of you.'

'What?—really?'

'Really. Oh, Delia, you have nothing of the modern married woman about you. You ought to be independent of my opinion, good or bad.'

'Then I'm afraid I'm a hopelessly old-fashioned married woman,' she answered dreamily.

She had laid aside her work, and sat gazing into the fire with her chin in her hands and her elbows on her knees.

'You are not sorry you married me, then?' she said in a low voice.

'Sorry?' he repeated. 'On the contrary, I think it was the most distinctly sensible thing I ever did.'

He had risen and was leaning against the mantel-shelf, looking down at her with lazily amused eyes.

'I can't think how I have done without you all these years,' he went on, thinking absently how pretty her hair looked, as the firelight shone on it.

'Don,' she said, flushing slightly, and then becoming very pale, 'please tell me truly—should you

have thought of marrying me if I hadn't said what I did about being discontented and lonely and wanting to run away, and—and all that ?'

'My dear child, how can I possibly tell,' he answered lightly. 'Perhaps I shouldn't. Then again, perhaps I should. We have discussed that before, haven't we ?'

'Yes, I know. But somehow it haunts me, and I keep wondering about it.'

'Well, if I were you, I shouldn't let it haunt me, and I shouldn't keep wondering about it. We are married, and I am the most contented fellow in the world, so far, and I want you to be the most contented little wife in the world. But don't let us keep pulling our contentment up by the roots every now and then to see how it is growing. I dare say we get on better than the majority of married couples. Love-matches are not always the happiest, you know.'

'No, I suppose not,' she answered. 'At least, so I have heard and read. Well, no one could say ours was a love-match, could they ?'

'Well, we were quite frank about it, as far as I remember, weren't we ?' he answered, caressing the waves of her hair lightly.

There was a pause. Then she said hesitatingly : 'I suppose—you have often been in love, though ?'

He laughed, the low amused laugh of the man who, for the time being, is at rest with himself and the world. Then he grew suddenly grave.

'No, my dear,' he said, 'I certainly have not. I can't remember any very sentimental episodes in my career. I was never made much of by women, as some fellows are. The only serious love-affair in my life was that which led to my first marriage, and that, as I think I told you, didn't last very long. I don't think I'm built on romantic lines, little girl. Sometimes I wonder——'

'Yes,' she said, turning her great serious eyes to his, as he paused, 'sometimes you wonder—what?'

'I sometimes wonder,' he went on slowly, 'if I did right in marrying you when you had seen no other—or at least very few other men. A bright young thing like you deserves a better fate than to be tied to an elderly widower with a family. It does sound a bit prosaic, doesn't it? Confess now,' he went on, watching her with a curious intentness. 'I was not quite the lover your girlish fancy had painted, was I?'

There was a subdued touch of anxiety in his tone that was patent even to himself, and rather surprised him.

Delia paused for a second or two; then said quietly:

'No, Don. But—you are very dear and good. And I really am glad I married you.'

Now, though Carstairs had no reason, nor right, to expect any other answer, Delia's frank honesty hurt him somehow. He hardly knew what he had expected. Certainly not that he was the embodiment

of all her youthful dreams, or any nonsense of that sort. As he was not in love with her, it was clearly better that her affection for him should be tepid and easily guided, like—well, like his own affection for her.

And yet—well, human hearts are unaccountable pieces of mechanism, and not at all amenable to any given laws or rules. Thus Delia's little speech had sorely wounded her husband's self-love. And a man's self-love is the most subtly-sensitive part of his being. More sensitive than his heart, or his fancy, or his passion, or all three put together.

And Delia realised instantly that something was wrong.

True, he only laughed a little, and said carelessly:

'That's right, brave honest little woman. Don't be tempted to flattery and story-telling, even to ingratiate yourself with a foolish, middle-aged husband who ought to know better than to ask impossible questions.'

She rose quickly, and laid her hand on his arm.

'But, Don,' she said hurriedly—'you asked me.'

'Yes, yes, I know,' he answered with an impatient gesture. 'There, there, run away to bed. It is late, and you look tired.'

Next morning brought Delia a note from Minx, who, by the way, had been married while Delia was on her wedding journey.

It was dated from Crane Hall, near Garrioch, Bedfordshire, and ran thus:

'DEAR LITTLE D.,

'Behold my American Peter and myself settled down at last! Of course settling down, as far as I am concerned, is a mere form of speech, for I could never settle anywhere for long. But really, I am rather in my element at present, as this is the rippingest old house you can possibly imagine. I believe Peter paid an awful price for it; but he looks upon money much as you and I look upon hayseed. We have not had any serious quarrels as yet, and I find him quite interesting. He, of course, thinks me perfection, and in my lovely trousseau gowns—the bills are just coming in for them!—I quite agree with him. My dear, they make me look more than pretty—absolutely irresistible! I am going to motor over to you to-morrow afternoon, and we can have a good old talk over ancient history. How is your iron-man? And what kind of stepmother do you make? But I shall see for myself to-morrow. Peter is going to give me a balloon on my next birthday. Motors are something of back-numbers nowadays. So long.

'Ever as always,

'MINX.'

In the afternoon Minx arrived, in an exceedingly smart motor, driven by a chauffeur as black as ebony. She was exquisitely dressed, and looked as radiant as ever.

'You dear Delia,' she exclaimed, as she touched

the latter's cheek with her own, 'how you have improved! You look—you look really fetching. I suppose it must be that you are at last properly dressed. It is wonderful. And how is the good-looking iron-man? And the unsuppressable family? I'm going to stay quite a piece, my dear, as Peter would say—for what I have to talk about would fill three volumes. What do you think of my chauffeur? Isn't he unique? I'm the only woman in England, I believe, with a really black chauffeur. It's most distinctive. And besides, however much he rolls in oil and dirt, he can't be any blacker. And that is such a comfort, isn't it?'

Delia smiled; and Minx, throwing herself into the corner of a wide, inviting-looking sofa, went on:

'And now tell me all about yourself. Are you having a good time? And is it an improvement on Holland Park Avenue? And is the aristocratic-looking iron-man good to you? And are you in love with each other?'

'I am having quite a good time,' Delia answered. 'And it is a very distinct improvement upon Holland Park Avenue. And what about you? Is Peter all you expected? And have you diamond buttons on your dressing-gowns, and seed-pearl embroidery on your petticoats, as you said you would?'

'I could if I liked,' was the laughing answer. 'But I've thought of better ways to spend my money. I suppose I've grown wiser with matrimony. Now, when will you and your iron-man

come over to dine and sleep? I'm simply dying to present my Peter. Where is Mr. Carstairs, by the way? But, of course, he is at the works, with his nose to the grindstone. I might have known. Well, my Peter doesn't let the grass grow under his feet, either. He is continually rushing up to town and making "deals," whatever they may be. He's nearly a millionaire now, and he means to be quite one before he dies.'

'And now tell me how you spend your time,' said Delia. 'Somehow I can't imagine you married.'

And the account of Minx's doings was long and—to Delia—interesting.

At last Mrs. Dunstable said:

'And now, what do you do all day, little Miss Prim?'

'Oh, I don't know,' the other answered, with a contented little smile. 'The days just go on, and one day is rather like another.'

'You seem to have the faculty of getting yourself into a backwater,' said Minx with a shrug. 'I shouldn't be surprised to hear that you do the housekeeping, just as you used to do when you were with the aunts.'

Delia laughed.

'But that is just what I do,' she said. 'At least, I do a considerable part of it. And I love it. And Don is very pleased with me,' she added softly.

'And Don is very pleased with you!' mimicked the other. 'Well, upon my word, Delia, it's my belief

that in a former existence you were nothing more nor less than a door-mat. Here you are, with a well-to-do husband ; a lovely place that only wants a touch or two to bring it up to date ; youth, health, and a decent amount of good looks—and you moon along quite content to do your husband's house-keeping, and stepmother his children, and murmur drivel about his being " pleased with you " ! I think I see myself trying to please Peter. It takes him all his time to please me, I can tell you. It is women like you who turn men into tyrants, and bullies, and slave-drivers. It makes me wild,' Minx concluded crossly.

' Don has not delevoped any slave-drivng tendencies as yet,' said Delia with a demure smile.

Minx leaned back on a pile of cushions, and regarded her friend as though she had been some curious specimen as yet unknown to collectors.

' And don't you go out at all ?' she said. ' I mean don't you go to any social functions, or don't you entertain in any way yourselves ?'

' We have given one or two quiet dinners,' Delia answered tranquilly. ' And sometimes we go out to dinner. To-morrow night, for instance, we are going to dine at the Vicarage.'

' At the Vicarage ?—at the Vansittarts ? Peter and I are going too. The vicar is a decent old fellow enough ; but she—well, she makes me tired. But Peter says we must be civil to them. Good gracious, it's late. I must fly. But—heavens and

earth, what's that noise? Is that your step-babies? Oh, the Philistines are upon us indeed!'

As she spoke the door burst open, and the four children, accompanied by Sammy, tumbled in one after another, all speaking at once, as was their habit.

They stopped short and became suddenly silent on catching sight of the visitor.

Minx gazed at them in mingled curiosity and amusement. And they took stock of her in undisguised admiration. For Minx had that kind of challenging beauty that even savage little girls and boys cannot but acknowledge.

'Well,' she said with a bewildering smile, as Delia presented them in rotation, 'do you think you shall like me? You are all staring at me very hard.'

The boys coloured, and shuffled their feet after the fashion of embarrassed boyhood. Sammy favoured her with his usual, stolid unwinking stare. Nan's small, plain face held latent dislike. But Lulu, to the surprise of all, came forward and thrust her beloved doll under the visitor's nose.

'I like you,' observed the doll's parent calmly. 'You have a pretty face like a dolly in a picture. You can kiss my dolly, if you like.'

'No, thank you, my child,' answered Minx with grave sweetness. 'Once when I was a little girl I promised never in all my life to kiss a doll, however much I might want to. And it's wicked to break promises, you know.'

Lulu retreated, eyeing her repulsed darling with dubious eyes.

'Oh doodness,' she murmured resentfully, as she climbed into Delia's lap.

'Is that your motor at the door ?' inquired Bob.

'Yes. Should you like to come for a drive ?'

'Rather,' exclaimed Jock and Bob in excited chorus.

But Nan said quietly :

'I'd rather stay with Mumsey, thank you.'

And Lulu echoed :

' Rather stay with Mumsey, thank you.'

Sammy said nothing ; but slowly taking a paper parcel from his pocket, he extracted therefrom a portion of sticky sweetmeat, which he, suddenly and without warning, pushed between Minx's rosy lips. Then he moved towards the door, and a few moments later was discovered installed in the motor, in the seat next the driver's, from which point of vantage he refused to be dislodged. Minx and Delia coaxed, Jock and Bob stormed, but without effect. Sammy ate sweetmeats and would not budge.

But suddenly Minx's black retainer appeared from under the car, where he had been executing some trifling repairs. For a second or so Sammy gazed at him as though petrified. Then, with a wild yell, he jumped out of the car, and tore off across the lawns and shubberies in the direction of his home.

Jock and Bob instantly quarrelled for his place ;

but the driver lifted Jock to the seat of honour, placed Bob inside, and at a signal from his mistress, who remained standing on the veranda with Delia and the little girls, spun off down the avenue and out of sight. They came back in about ten minutes or so, Bob now seated next the driver, and both boys in a high state of glee and satisfaction.

They assisted Minx into the car with laborious gallantry, hoped she would come soon again, and hinted that they would always be open to invitations to accompany her for drives at any time. She thanked them with a bewitching smile, and was gone in a flash.

'What a ripping good sort!' exclaimed Jock, as they all trooped into the house. 'That's what I call a right-down pretty woman. Then, flinging an arm across Delia's shoulder, he added affectionately: 'Not that you're not pretty too, little Mums. Only you don't hit a fellow in the eye as she does.'

'Mumsey's twice as pretty,' exclaimed Nan angrily.

'Now, now, my good girl,' said Bob, with an irritating assumption of a desire to soothe, 'don't let your angry passions rise, or I shan't let you help me to skin a fine rabbit I have in the den.'

'You know I wouldn't help you,' burst out Nan, with horrified eyes. 'You know I can't even bear to look at the horrible things.'

'What did you say, sweet child?' Bob continued, in a voice of engaging sweetness. 'That you *insist*

on helping me to skin the animal? Come along, then. Let us hasten to the gory scene.'

And he was about to lift her in his arms, when Jock, who, however he might tease his twin himself, never suffered anyone else to do so, exclaimed angrily:

'Now then, Bob, don't make an ass of yourself, or I'll give you a jolly good punching. Let her alone, will you?'

Bob loosed his hold, and Nan fled, while Lulu pounded Bob with her unfortunate doll, who had, from time immemorial, served as alternate weapon and plaything.

A little later, about an hour before dinner, to be exact, Delia and the children were all assembled round the fire in the schoolroom. Delia had got into the way of giving up half an hour before dressing to her step-children, and they had come to look upon it as a special right and privilege.

A dismayed and displeased surprise, therefore, showed itself upon four youthful faces when, on this particular evening, the door opened, and Carstairs came in.

It was a cosy enough group that met the newcomer's eyes in the leaping firelight. Delia was seated on the hearthrug, one arm round Lulu, the other round Nipper. Nan and Jock were squabbling amicably for possession of a small kitten, and Bob was lying face downwards, leaning on his elbows and tickling Lulu's ears with a feather-brush.

'You all look very comfortable,' said Carstairs, as he sank into a shabby armchair of which the springs were dreams of the past. 'No, Delia, don't get up, my dear. Sitting on the floor is quite a suitable attitude for your apparent years. What are you doing, all in the dark?'

'Nothing,' Jock answered shortly, leaving Nan in undisputed possession of the kitten.

'It isn't dark, there's plenty of light,' supplemented Bob, throwing away his feather-brush.

'I always come here for half an hour before going to dress,' said Delia, as she tried to fasten up her hair, which had come down, and was hanging in a ruffled rope to her waist. 'You are home earlier than usual,' she added.

'Yes,' was the absent answer.

He was thinking how singularly young and childish this little wife of his looked. Sitting there, she hardly looked older than Nan. He sighed a little, he could hardly have told why; and Nan, who was close to him, heard the sigh, and put out her hand impulsively to take his as it hung by his side. His fingers closed over it warmly, and a second or two later he put his arm round her shoulders, saying kindly:

'Well, Nan, how have the lessons gone to-day, eh?'

For Nan's lessons were the bugbears of her existence, and Miss Torpey and she were sworn foes.

The girl flushed with pleasure at the unwonted caress. But she only answered awkwardly enough:

'Oh, all right.'

Then, with a sudden resolution, she went on almost in a gasp:

'Father, I wish, if we must have a governess, it needn't be Miss Torpey.'

'Wish if must have doverness needn't be Torpey,' gabbled Lulu the echo.

'Why?' asked Carstairs. 'Don't you get on together?'

'Old Torpey's a fool,' volunteered Bob sullenly. 'She doesn't know as much as Jock and me.'

Carstairs looked questioningly at his wife.

'Isn't the woman competent, Delia?' he said, passing his hand somewhat wearily over his forehead. For his head ached, and he had had a tiring and harassing day.

Delia hesitated. Then she said:

'Perhaps I am not a fair judge, because I don't like Miss Torpey. But I certainly don't think she is very well educated, as far as I can see; and I think the girls would get on much better with someone they could respect.'

'Go it, Mumsey, you're a brick,' murmured Bob in an ecstasy of delight.

'Then dismiss her, my dear, and get someone else,' said Carstairs decidedly.

'Oh, father, you don't mean it!' cried Nan, squeezing his hand spasmodically. 'It isn't possible that you can mean it!'

Her father laughed lazily, and gave a reassuring

return squeeze to the grimy little fingers within his own.

'Oh, isn't possible that can mean it,' echoed Lulu, shaking her curly head to and fro.

Then without warning she sprang upon her father's knee, and flung her fat little arms round his neck.

'Love you, love you,' she cried joyously. 'Oh doodness, love you awful, 'cause not going to let old Torpey come any more.'

Carstairs struggled a little under her bear-like embrace. And yet it thrilled him pleasantly to feel the childish arms about him, as it did to feel Nan's fingers in his own. For he had never either received or expected the affection of his children in all his years of fatherhood.

The boys regarded with suspicion this sudden softening of the reigning power. They had alternately feared and disliked their father too long as a tyrant to be drawn towards him all at once. For Carstairs had always been severe and perhaps a trifle unjust to his boys. And though boys do not always resent severity, they invariably do resent injustice.

'Is he going to stick there all night?' muttered Jock under his breath to Bob, when the clock had chimed the half-hour, and the master of the house showed no signs of moving.

'I suppose so,' Bob muttered back again. 'Looks like it.'

Delia was gazing at the fire with dreamy, con-

tented eyes. She was beginning to find her niche in the household. The somewhat monotonous life did not weary her as it might have done had her previous life been as gay as that of most other girls. She felt almost sorry that Minx had come to ruffle up the calm of life at Garrioch. For she knew very well that calm and Minx were as antipathetic as oil and water.

Lulu's shrill treble broke in upon her musings. 'Awful pretty lady came to-day,' the child was saying, as she balanced herself perilously on her father's knee. 'But don't like her much, because wouldn't kiss my dolly.'

'Who was it, Delia?' asked Carstairs, depositing the small speaker summarily on the floor; for she was butting her head perilously near his eyes.

'It was my friend, Minx Crayshaw. She has not been very long married. She is Mrs. Dunstable, now. She married a rich American, and he has bought Crane Hall. She says it is only six or seven miles away.'

'Oh yes, of course. I remember her,' he answered.

His tone was not specially cordial. For, as a matter of fact, he had not been at all attracted by the lovely Miss Crayshaw, on the few occasions when they had met. And being what that young lady would have called rather 'old-fashioned' in his ideas on certain matters, he did not exactly approve of her as a companion for Delia.

Indeed, a good many people did not approve of this, gay, shallow little woman. And yet there was no real harm in her. And if she had been born without an emotional heart, that was surely her misfortune rather than her fault.

'She was ripping,' observed Jock, shrewdly detecting the shade of chill in his father's tone—'and no end jolly besides. And she's got far and away the best motor I've ever seen about here.'

'And she's got a nigger for a driver,' put in Bob. 'He's a caution to look at, but he's going to let us drive one day when no one's in the car but him and us.'

Here the dressing-gong sounded through the house, and the meeting broke up.

Chapter XI

THE drawing-room at Garrioch Vicarage was low-ceiled and quaintly shaped, and ought to have been a very charming room. But as Mrs. Vansittart had had it entirely refurnished a few years ago in bamboo, and upholstered and curtained in a singularly fearful shade of purple, it jarred upon most people almost as much as did Mrs. Vansittart herself.

The vicar detested the room, and seldom entered it, save on the rare occasions when his wife gave a dinner-party.

'You know, my dear,' Mrs. Vansittart had confided to Delia some time ago, 'I really do think you ought to get Mr. Carstairs to refurnish Garrioch Towers. These old dingy pieces of furniture are so depressing. When I first came here the place was crammed with old, worm-eaten, spindle-legged chairs and rickety tables, and the hangings were the most hideous faded green you can imagine. I soon made a clean sweep of them—had them all packed away in an attic. I believe there is quite a rage for that sort of thing now, so I dare say I could have sold them for quite a nice little sum. But

the vicar wouldn't hear of it. And he absolutely refused to let me change the arrangement of any of the other rooms. But in the drawing-room I was determined to have my way. Indeed, it is my one refuge from the gloominess of the rest of the house. And it is a pretty room, don't you think so ?'

Whereupon Delia, with a desperate effort to marry truth and politeness, had answered :

' It is certainly very light, and—and unusual.'

And Mrs. Vansittart, who had a point of resemblance to the animal known as the rhinoceros, had replied contentedly :

' Yes, I think it is.'

To-night, the room was full of people, for it was the night of the Vicarage dinner-party.

The hostess wore a gown of pale pink brocade that exactly matched the hue of her eyelids. It was cut painfully low, but as the wearer had no figure to speak of, this was not important. Indeed, (as Minx said afterwards) it was not indecent—only funny.

Delia was dressed in a quaintly-made creamy silk with a gold-embroidered sash ; and her husband's eyes rested on her approvingly more than once. She looked more womanly than usual to-night ; her head was held erect, her eyes were like stars, and an unwonted colour was in her cheeks. Even Minx, resplendent in green gauze shot with silver, was almost rivalled by the young mistress of Garrioch Towers.

To-morrow, possibly, Delia might be very nearly plain. But to-night she was very nearly beautiful.

Peter V. Dunstable was much taken with her; and when the men came to the drawing-room after dinner, at once placed himself by her side. He was a tall, pale, thin young man, with thick brown hair, and very keen eyes, and in spite of his pronounced American accent, he had a very pleasant voice.

'My wife talks of you a lot, Mrs. Carstairs,' he said as he took a low chair close to Delia's. 'I suppose you've been friends for a pretty considerable time?'

'For some years,' she answered. 'She is the only girl friend I have.'

'She's a warm-hearted little person where she takes a fancy,' he said meditatively. 'And she's always, I understand, been stuck on you. I hope we'll all be friends—and your husband too.'

'I hope we shall,' smiled Delia. Then she added: 'How very pretty Minx looks to-night.'

An expression of frank delight crossed Mr. Dunstable's face.

'I'm quite with you,' he said. 'To my mind she's far and away the prettiest woman I ever saw. And she's as cute—well, it would take a year to tell how cute she is. She could give two or three streets and a lane to most men for cuteness.'

Meanwhile Minx, to use her own expression, was 'exploiting' Carstairs.

'So you see, I've come to be your next door

neighbour—almost,' she was saying, looking up at his grave face with naughty sparkles in her beautiful eyes.

'Yes, so I understand,' he answered. 'Crane Hall is a beautiful old place.'

'Yes, it's not at all a bad show,' she agreed. 'It's deadly dull just now, though. But we'll change all that pretty soon. By the way, I want you to let Delia come over to me as often as she can. It's awfully slow for her, shut up in that old barrack of yours, playing sheep-dog to your savage children.'

'Yes? Has she complained of feeling dull?' asked Carstairs quietly.

'Oh, no! You know she never would. But she is young, and she has been cooped up so long with those old aunts of hers, that she really ought to have a bit of a fling, or she'll be an old woman before she's a young one. What are you going to do at Christmas?'

'Oh, I don't know—the usual things, I suppose. Her aunts are coming to us, I believe, and an old chum of mine, Dinwoodie. I think you met him when Delia and I were married.'

'Oh, yes, I remember him. A big, good-looking man with a large nose. I liked him. Perhaps you'll lend him to me when you're done with him. But do tell me who that tiny, Dresden-china-ish woman in black gauze is—talking to the vicar. I should just like to catch her up and kiss her.'

'She is a Mrs. Edgecombe. She has just come

back from some out of the way place in Scotland with her two boys. She is a widow, and those two tall young fellows just being introduced to my wife are her sons.'

'A widow—the mother of those two grown-up-looking young men!' ejaculated Minx. 'Why, she looks like a little girl.'

'She is a very sweet and charming woman,' said Carstairs, looking across the room with genuine affection at the small lady in question. 'And both her sons adore her. We all do, indeed.'

'What?—you also?' she asked mischievously.

'I said all,' he answered smiling.

'Does Delia know?' she inquired, covering the lower part of her face with her fan.

'Does Delia know what?'

'That you adore this fascinating little widow?'

An indescribable expression crossed Carstairs' face.

'I don't think she would object,' he replied quietly.

'Oh, indeed! I don't know. I should most decidedly object to my Peter adoring anybody but me, I can tell you,' observed Mrs. Dunstable with an ineffable drawl. 'Though, to do him justice, he hasn't shown any symptoms of wanting to.'

Carstairs was silent.

'Do you know you are a most extraordinary man?' Minx said, looking at him with her head on one side. 'Did you ever pay a compliment in your life, I wonder? Have you any idea of making

love? And yet I suppose you must have, or you would never have managed to capture two wives.'

It was a peculiarity of Minx's that she could say the most outrageous things without their being resented as similar remarks would undoubtedly have been resented from anyone else.

So, though Carstairs coloured a little, he only answered easily:

'We can all make love upon occasion, I suppose.'

She shook her head.

'I don't know. I think you would go about it queerly.'

'Well, you see I can't make love to you, so my methods, unfortunately, can never become known to you,' he said, with the indulgent smile that most people eventually bestowed on Mrs. Peter V. Dunstable.

'But why can't you make love to me? I should find it awfully stimulating. The love-making of novices always is,' was the saucy rejoinder.

'I dare say!' he answered absently.

She followed the direction of his eyes with an amused look in her own.

'I believe you are madly in love with Delia,' she said laughing, 'though she is your wife.'

'Why not because she is my wife?'

She shrugged her satiny shoulders.

'And yet,' she continued, 'she assured me that your mutual affection was of the most mild and platonic description.'

'When did she tell you that?' he asked shortly.

'Oh, I forget. Just after you were engaged, I think. Look—she and your Mrs. Edgecombe, whom you adore, are quite chumming up together.'

'Yes, so I see. I shall be glad if they are friends,' he answered.

'So much more desirable a friendship than with poor little Mrs. Dunstable,' she observed, with a [illegible] imitation of his own voice and manner.

'What I have to your superior judgment?' he [illegible].

[illegible] that between Delia and Berenice [illegible] had already sprung up one of these [illegible] that sometimes do spring up [illegible] unrelated, irrespective of age or sex, and [illegible] more often than not, ripen into a lifelong [illegible].

[illegible] when she was scarcely more than eighteen, [illegible] two sons when she was twenty-one, [illegible] her twenty-fifth birthday, that had [illegible] Berenice Edgecombe's life [illegible].

[illegible] had been grave and elderly and [illegible] for him had held more of [illegible] than sharp pain. For her [illegible] thought and planned. And [illegible] reached young manhood, she [illegible]. So, her heart was always a [illegible] with unquenchable gladness [illegible].

because God had permitted her to bring into the world the two beings who represented to her all manly perfection.

And they delighted in their 'Motherkin' as they persisted in calling her. For she was too small and quaint and wayward and deliciously absurd, they said, to be a real mother.

They were hovering about her now, as she talked to Delia, looking down at her in fond and proud approval. As yet, no other woman had rivalled their beloved 'Motherkin' in the loyal young hearts of George and Ronald Edgecombe.

'Yes, I think they are fine-looking boys,' Mrs. Edgecombe said, as Mrs. Vansittart convoyed the boys in question across the room to introduce them to Minx. 'I never see why one shouldn't enthuse over one's own people and one's own things. Do you? And they are just as proud of me as I am of them, bless their dear faithful hearts. They always treat me like a spoilt little girl—though I was forty yesterday.'

'You don't look it,' said Delia impulsively.

'Don't I?—you dear little thing. I am, though. And my boys are twenty-one and twenty respectively. The one nearest the mantelpiece is George. He is the elder. Some people think he is the handsomer.'

'I don't think there is much to choose between them,' said Delia. 'And they look good as well as handsome.'

'Motherkin' positively beamed. Another link was forged of the prospective friendship.

'You are just the same age as my husband,' went on Delia, letting her eyes wander across the room until they met Carstairs.

'Your husband is a very valued friend of mine,' said Motherkin, laying a dainty little hand on Delia's. 'I don't think his first marriage was quite so happy as it might have been. I am glad he has scored such a success with his second.'

'I hope he has,' Delia answered with a somewhat wistful sigh. 'He deserves it. You will miss your sons when they marry,' she added, irrelevantly enough.

A sudden storm of fury seemed to sweep over Mrs. Edgecombe's delicate features.

'But they shall never marry,' she said in a low fierce undertone. 'I could not bear it—I simply could not bear it.'

Then she added more quietly, as she twisted her tiny hands nervously together:

'But they never would—never. They have often said they never would. They would not be happy away from me. And I—my life would be over.'

Her eyes were full of tears; and Delia looked at her in wonder, mixed with remorse.

'I am so sorry,' she said, 'so very, very sorry I said that. But—I did not know you felt like that about it.'

'No, no,' assented the other hurriedly. 'I am

a fool about my boys, I know. But I can't help it.'

A little later, as the party was breaking up, she said:

'Will you come and see me, Mrs. Carstairs? I live at Rowan Cottage, only a mile or so from Garrioch Towers. Do come. I know I ought to have called on you. But I have just got back from Scotland with the boys. And I've been so busy settling down. So you won't be ceremonious, and wait for my call, will you?'

'I should love to come,' the other answered heartily.

As Delia crossed the room to say good-night to her perspiring hostess, she heard a woman's voice say from behind a screen of bamboo and beads:

'Yes, they seem to have struck up a sudden affinity. I wonder why Donald Carstairs married that cow-eyed child? We all expected he would have married Berenice Edgecombe. It would have been an ideal match in every way.'

'And did Berenice Edgecombe expect it too?' said a man's voice drily.

'Oh, no! She thinks of nothing but these two lanky sons of hers. But I think he——'

Delia heard no more. But a curious little pang quivered through her heart.

Had Don cared for this dainty little woman? If he had, it was no wonder, she told herself. And, strange to say, the thought of it did not counteract

the strong attraction she felt towards the fierce little mother who so idolized her boys.

'*Good*-night,' Mrs. Vansittart was saying. '*So* glad you could come. Of course I haven't had a word with you. But there—a hostess must efface herself. How lovely your gown is. *I* can't afford such gowns, *now*. But at one time—ah well, one must pay for one's follies. *Sammy!*'

This last dismayed dissyllable was addressed to a small pyjama-clad figure poised on one leg in the aperture of the drawing-room door.

'I want to say good-night to Delia,' observed this apparition with stolid and not-to-be-moved determination. 'She promised she'd come and say good-night to me, and see my pet mice. And if she doesn't, it'll be a wicked lie.'

Delia skimmed lightly across the room, and took the indignant Sammy's hand.

'Come and show me the mice, dear,' she said. 'I hadn't forgotten. But you shouldn't have come down. You should have waited. Your mother is quite vexed.'

'Why?' demanded the delinquent, as he hopped upstairs by Delia's side.

'Oh, well, gentlemen don't do things like that,' she answered somewhat vaguely.

'I don't want to be a gentleman,' was the disconcerting reply, 'I only want to be a boy.'

'But if you don't try to be a gentleman when

you are a boy, you won't be one when you are a man, Sammy.'

'I don't care. I'll just be a cad, then,' returned Sammy cheerfully, as they reached his sleeping-room. 'They have just as good a time. So what's the use of worrying?'

When the mice had been duly inspected and admired, Delia bade her youthful admirer good-night, and hurried down to the hall, where her husband was awaiting her.

As they drove home under the winter stars, Carstairs said tenderly:

'You looked very pretty to-night, my little Delia. I felt proud of my wife.'

'I am very glad,' she answered in a low voice.

But a certain listlessness in her tone made him look down at her in some concern.

'Anything the matter, dear?' he asked, putting a caressing arm round her.

She shook her head; but he saw that her lips were quivering.

'Dear, are you tired? Are you ill?' he whispered anxiously.

'No, oh, no,' she replied with a hysterical catch in her breath. 'But oh, Don, dear Don—I wish—I wish——'

'You wish what, my dearest?' he said, bending his head until his moustache brushed her cheek. 'Tell me, little one.'

She turned, and pressed her head against his breast.

'I wish—I wish with all my heart that I were not twenty years younger than you.'

She felt the clasp of his arm relax instantly. There was a pause. Then he said quietly:

'You should put it differently. You mean you wish I were not twenty years older than you. Well, it is natural. It is too great a difference, perhaps. But—it is too late to put things right now. We must make the best of it, my poor little wife.'

As he spoke, he withdrew his arm, and letting down the window, leaned out into the chilly darkness.

She touched his arm with timid fingers.

'Don,' she said unsteadily—'don't misunderstand me. I didn't mean what you think. I only meant——'

'My dear Delia,' he answered, drawing up the window again, 'you made it pretty plain, I think, what you meant. There is no use in analysing the subject further. If a man is fool enough to marry a girl half his age, he has to pay the penalty, I suppose—sooner or later. There, there, for God's sake don't cry about it,' he added, more irritably than he often spoke.

Delia choked back her tears; for little as she knew of men, she had a dim notion that these signs of feminine weakness must be used sparingly and seldom when courtship has merged itself in matrimony.

Presently Carstairs said with a tinge of remorse in his voice:

'I am a brute to speak to you so. But—well, I've no excuse to offer. Except that I lost my temper. Forget it, child.'

To his surprise, she flung herself against him, and buried her face in his neck.

'Ah, Don, Don—never speak to me in that cold dreadful voice again. I can't bear it. Oh Don, go on being kind and gentle to me, even though you don't love me. It'll break my heart if you're ever cruel to me. I don't expect you to be as fond of me as other men are of their wives. I'm too young and silly and ignorant of the things that please and interest you. But I want to be a good wife, Don. I truly do. No woman of your own age could want it more, or try harder.'

She was not crying. But her breath was coming in long gasping sobs that seemed to rend her as tearless weeping rends a strong man.

Carstairs was touched in spite of himself.

'Why, Delia,' he said, drawing her to him again, 'Why, my poor little Delia. Hush, hush, child. Try to calm yourself. Who has been talking to you? What has upset you?'

She looked up at him with dry miserable eyes.

'Forgive me,' she faltered. 'Forgive me for—for making a scene. Aunt Sara always said men—especially husbands—can't bear scenes.'

'Wise Aunt Sara,' he said slowly.

Then with a sudden impulse he put his hand under her chin, and deliberately kissed her lips.

'Oh little girl, little girl,' he murmured, 'don't let us spoil our lives by bickerings and quarrellings.'

'No, no,' she answered, creeping closer to him, and shyly hiding her face on his arm. 'I will try to be good and—and like other people's wives.'

'I don't want you to be like anybody's wife—except mine,' he said gravely.

Carstairs sat up late that night, smoking furiously, and pacing with restless feet up and down the library.

'How she has crept into my heart, the winsome childlike wee thing,' he thought. 'How I should miss her queer, half-loving, half-shy ways if I had to do without her. What is it about her that holds me so? I am not in love with her, any more than she is with me. And yet——'

He flung himself into a chair, and leaning his elbow on his knee, stared moodily at the dying fire.

If he was not in love with her, whence the passion of joy that had shaken him as she had rested in his arms half an hour ago? If he was not in love with her, why the flash of momentary anger against Dunstable to-night as he bent over her with some silly meaningless compliment. Why had the brief touch of her lips thrilled him so?

'What a damned fool I am!' he exclaimed, as he threw his half-smoked cigar into the fire.

And Nipper, thumping his tail emphatically on the floor, seemed to agree with him.

'I wonder—if she—if some day——' Carstairs

muttered as he resumed his restless promenade. 'But no—it is hardly likely. And yet——'

With an impatient gesture he took up a paper, then threw it down again, and resuming his seat, remained for a time very still.

And Delia, in the room above, kneeling by her bedside, and praying her innocent old-world prayers with closed eyes and clasped hands, sent up a whispered petition that one day her husband might come to love her—if only a little. Then she put out her candle and got into bed, and was soon sleeping as peacefully as a child.

When Carstairs came up, nearly an hour later, she was lying with one arm flung above her head, her sweet young face half hidden by her unbound hair.

He put down his candle, and stood looking down at her for a second or two in silence. Presently he stooped, and touched her cheek lightly with his lips. Then he passed on into his dressing-room.

Chapter XII

It only wanted three days until Christmas, and Delia was in a state of great excitement. For the aunts were coming for a visit of a week or ten days, and she longed to show them of how fair a domain she was mistress—forgetting that the old ladies had known Garrioch Towers before she was born or thought of.

The children were also much excited, not because of the aunts ; but because it was nearly Christmas. And Batty always contrived to endow the season with some kind of festivity for the 'poor young things,' as she mistakenly called them. Carstairs—since his first wife's death—had, until now, invariably spent the day in town.

It was now fixed that the boys were to go to Harrow after the holidays, and the knowledge led to their putting on what Nan called 'a good deal of calm side.'

A new governess was in course of selection for the girls, Miss Torpey having been dismissed, to her pupils' unbounded joy.

Carstairs' one and only chum, Alec Dinwoodie,

was to be a Christmas guest, and Delia was nervously anxious that her husband should be pleased with all the arrangements. As a matter of fact Carstairs detested the sorely-misnamed festive season, and was always heartily glad when it was over.

The aunts duly arrived, wrapped up like two dear old mummies, and with luggage enough for a three months' sojourn anywhere.

Delia met them at the station, accompanied by Nan. The old ladies were terribly fussy and flurried; for it was some years since they had left home even for a night, and they were certain that some of their luggage must have been lost. Only after they had counted every package twice over, and compared the number with the list carried by Aunt Esther, did they consent to leave their belongings to the care of one of the servants, and seat themselves in the carriage, which had already been waiting for a considerable time, for the train was late.

'My dear, we are very glad to be able to come,' said Aunt Esther—'oh, my little black bag, I must have left it in the train—stop the carriage, Delia, quick! Oh no, here it is. You are looking very well, my dear, as far as I can see in this dim light. And who is this? Ah, your young step-daughter. How do you do, my dear?'

'We miss you very much, my dear,' said Aunt Sara, in her familiar wavering voice, when she too had spoken to Nan. 'Your husband's gain has

been our loss indeed. He—your husband—is well, I trust ?'

'Quite well, thank you, auntie. But he was detained later than he expected at the works, or else he would have come with me to meet you. I hope you left all well at home ?'

'Oh, yes, child, just as usual. The house seems very quiet now—very quiet. Oh, good gracious, what's that under the seat ? A dog ? I hope and trust he doesn't bite. I have a perfect horror of dogs, as you ought to know,' added the old lady sharply.

'I'm so sorry, Aunt Sara. I didn't know he was there. Nipper, you are a naughty dog. Curley up and make yourself as small as possible.'

Nipper reluctantly obeyed.

When they arrived at the hall door, Carstairs was standing on the steps, and to the aunts' mingled delight and confusion, kissed them both affectionately.

'I am your nephew now, you know,' he said, laughing as they blushed and bridled. 'And therefore I have certain privileges.'

Then Delia carried them off to the rooms set apart for them, which, to their entire satisfaction, opened into one another.

'My dear niece, you have a beautiful home,' the two dear old things said, almost simultaneously, as they sank on a sofa beside the fire in Aunt Esther's room.

'Yes,' the girl answered quietly. 'It is a lovely place.'

'And you are happy, of course,' continued Aunt Sara. Then, without waiting for an answer, she added:

'Dear Donald looks thin, I think, and a little careworn. But of course he is no longer a boy, and I dare say still feels the effects of the illness you told us of. And how do you get on with the dear children?'

'Very well indeed. Much better than I thought I should,' the girl answered.

A muffled thumping at the door heralded the entrance of Lulu, with her doll held head downwards and regardless of shame.

'Came to see aunts,' she said, planting herself in front of these ladies, and regarding them with fearless curiosity. 'Are you very old?' she inquired.

Aunt Sara bent down and kissed her.

'Yes, dear, we are very old,' she said somewhat wistfully.

'Really, Sara, speak for yourself,' exclaimed Miss Penfold with an affronted air.

'Were you once small like me?' continued the youthful inquisitor.

'Yes, my dear, we were once small like you,' said Aunt Esther severely. 'But we were taught to behave prettily in presence of our elders.'

'Don't like you,' announced the little one boldly. 'You have a cross, crinkly face.'

'So will you, my dear, when you are old like us,' said Aunt Sara with a little sigh and a shake of her head.

'Oh, doodness!' shrieked Lulu, in sudden revolt. 'Oh, doodness, don't want to be old and crinkly and cross. *Won't* be it! Wont! *Won't!*'

And, wailing bitterly, she hid her face in Delia's skirt, and kicked in impotent rage.

'What a curious child!' said Aunt Sara hesitatingly.

'What a very rude and ungoverned child!' amended Aunt Esther in austere tones.

With a hasty apology Delia caught up the weeping culprit, and carried her out of the room.

The doll was dropped in transit, and Miss Penfold gingerly picked it up by one leg, and deposited it on the door-mat.

A few minutes later Delia returned, and submitted to much affectionate questioning and examining by her aunts, who felt a certain pride in having engineered such a satisfactory marriage for 'poor dear James's daughter.'

For that they had engineered it neither doubted for a moment.

'What an improvement,' said Aunt Sara, as she turned her niece round and round, and took in all the details of gown and hair-dressing. 'Really, my dear, you look like a different girl. You look absolutely—well, *almost*— pretty.'

'Now, Sara, don't make the child vain,' put in Aunt Esther. 'She was always well enough to look

at. And now that she is happy and well settled, I dare say there is an improvement. I hope she recognises, but I have no doubt she does, that it is to us she owes her husband and establishment, and that she feels grateful accordingly.'

'Of course I do, dear aunts,' Delia answered. 'I owe everything to you. For if it had not been for you, I should never have seen Don at all. But how smart you both are! I declare you look years younger than when I last saw you. What very pretty dresses! Madame Altier has surpassed herself.'

The evening passed in all harmony; and the aunts were graciously pleased with everything. Even the boys were on their best behaviour, and Lulu only made a brief appearance between dessert and bed-time.

On the following day Minx motored over in the course of the morning, and announced her intention of staying to lunch. 'Peter,' she said, was coming in the afternoon to fetch her.

'Not that I really want "fetching",' she said gaily. 'But dear Peter is still newly-married enough to look upon my goings-out and comings-in with absurd interest.'

Miss Penfold, who was knitting in a chair near the fire, looked at the speaker severely through her spectacles, and said:

'Surely a husband's devotion is not a thing to scoff at, Mrs. Dunstable?'

'No, not exactly to scoff at,' answered Minx comfortably. 'But it's a bit out of date, all the same.'

'Indeed!' was the chilly answer. 'I should be sorry if Delia held similar opinions.'

'But she doesn't,' declared Minx. 'She never holds any but the most orthodox opinions on any given subject. Besides, her husband is a cold-blooded tranquillist, and doesn't worry about her, one way or another.'

Delia flushed suddenly, and pressed her lips hard together.

Suddenly the boys made their appearance, brushed and furbished up generally. For the knowledge of Minx's arrival recalled the promise that future motor-rides might be in prospect.

'Has your motor gone round to the stables?' inquired Jock, when the preliminary greetings had been exchanged. 'I don't see it at the door.'

'No,' she said, 'I have sent it back to the Hall. My husband is coming over with it in the afternoon.'

'Oh!' was the blank answer.

And the boys realised that Minx had forgotten all about her promise—as indeed she had. But they would rather have died, figuratively speaking, than remind her.

'Where is Sammy?' inquired Delia.

'He's not out to-day,' volunteered Nan. 'He's been naughty.'

'What has he done?' asked Minx. 'I thought boys were never naughty.'

'Did you?' said Nan curtly. 'They're never anything else, I think. But to-day Sammy was worse than usual. He knocked three big nails into the cistern, and the water all ran out and spoiled the new stair-carpets and everything.'

'Just like him, little fool,' said Jock. 'What's the sense of doing things like that? You don't get any fun out of it.'

'You never get any fun out of wrong-doing,' put in Aunt Esther, in her deepest and most disapproving staccato.

'Oh yes, you do,' said Bob, with a wicked chuckle. 'Why, Jock and me have had larks that we got no end of fun out of. But if anyone had found out it was us—well, we shouldn't have caught it, oh, no, not at all.'

'But you and Jock wouldn't do the things Sammy does,' protested Nan. 'You remember once he put seccotine on the vicar's chair in his study. And when the vicar had finished writing his sermon he couldn't get up without taking the chair with him.

The boys exploded uproariously.

'Sammy has some ideas,' choked Bob. 'I will say that for him.'

'Sammy must be a little horror,' said Minx, shrugging her shoulders. 'Now, Delia,' she added, as the children slowly oozed out of the room one by one, for Aunt Esther's eye awed and depressed them —'I want you and your husband and the Misses

Penfold to give me the pleasure of your company for two days at the end of the month. I'm going to have a little informal dance and private theatricals on New Year's Eve. You will all come, won't you ?'

'I must ask Don,' said Delia hesitatingly. 'And—I don't know if the aunts——'

'Arrange it as you please, my dear,' said Aunt Esther with unexpected graciousness. 'I have not seen private theatricals for many years. As Mrs. Dunstable is so kind as to ask us, I, for my part, should rather enjoy it. I remember staying at Crane Hall many years ago.'

Aunt Sara and Delia could hardly believe their ears.

'But Mr. Dinwoodie will be with us,' said Delia. 'I had forgotten.'

'But bring him, of course. He's a bachelor, isn't he ?' said Minx casually, 'and has rather a nice face, if I remember rightly. And, oh, yes, of course, he's heir to his uncle, Sir Edward Dinwoodie. An eligible, good-looking bachelor !' she added laughing. 'I can tell you the species is becoming gradually extinct.'

'If he'd been old and married and ugly, you wouldn't have had anything to say to him, would you ?' said Delia mischievously.

'No,' answered Minx with engaging frankness. 'I like all my guests to be distinguished in some way. If they haven't youth, they must have brains, good looks, money, or position. If they

haven't brains, they must have youth, good looks, money, or position. If they haven't good looks, they must have all the rest. And so on, and so on.'

The Misses Penfold bridled a little, and settled the laces on their bodices consciously. Somehow this speech gratified them, as wily Minx intended it should. It gave the idea that they themselves, having been pointedly invited to Crane Hall, possessed at least some of the attributes mentioned. Insensibly Minx rose ten per cent. in their estimation. They thought they might possibly have misjudged her. With all her flippancy, she seemed a young woman of some discernment. They did not know, of course, that they had been invited as make-weights to two old male relatives of Peter's, of the type called by Minx 'borous.' And in this case, as in many others, ignorance was happier than knowledge.

* * * * *

Christmas had come and gone; and all the usual wishes had been wished, and the usual singular viands devoured, and the usual presents interchanged.

Thanks to the combined efforts of Delia and Batty, the young Carstairs' had had a thoroughly enjoyable time, and they assured Delia that she was, from the boys' point of view, a 'brick,' and from Nan's, a 'dear.' Lulu, of course, echoing the sentiments of both.

Delia found a congenial friend and companion in

Alec Dinwoodie, and questioned him by the hour as to her husband's boyhood and youth, listening eagerly to his good-naturedly recalled reminiscences of these far-away days.

On the afternoon of New Year's Eve they all drove over to Crane Hall, and arrived in the midst of a violent snowstorm.

The house was full of people, and it was a pleasant surprise to Delia to find her friend of Grünwald, Mrs. Walham Orpington Green, and her daughter, Peggy. The later was more outspoken and independent than ever. She seemed genuinely glad to meet Delia again, and actually kissed her, an unheard of demonstration for this uncompromising child of nature.

'It is jolly, meeting you again,' Peggy said in her wholesome, unaffected young voice. 'Here I am, you see, doing the same old round, when all the time I'm longing to cut off to Australia or Canada, or somewhere where one doesn't have to see people and talk silly rot all day, and where I could have a good time all on my own.'

'You are just as unconventional as ever, I see,' said Delia laughing.

'Unconventional—no,' objected the other. 'I don't know that I am. I simply want to be happy on rational lines. I don't want to be married. I don't want to be among what the papers call 'smart' people. I don't want to spend all my days trying to go one better than anyone else. I don't want to

play bridge, or sit up all night dancing with idiots who think of nothing, and can't even talk about that. I don't want to drive in the Park, or go to races, or Lord's, or Ranelagh—or anywhere where all the rest go.'

'Then what do you want?' asked Delia, looking at Peggy's unpretty and yet lovable face with keen interest.

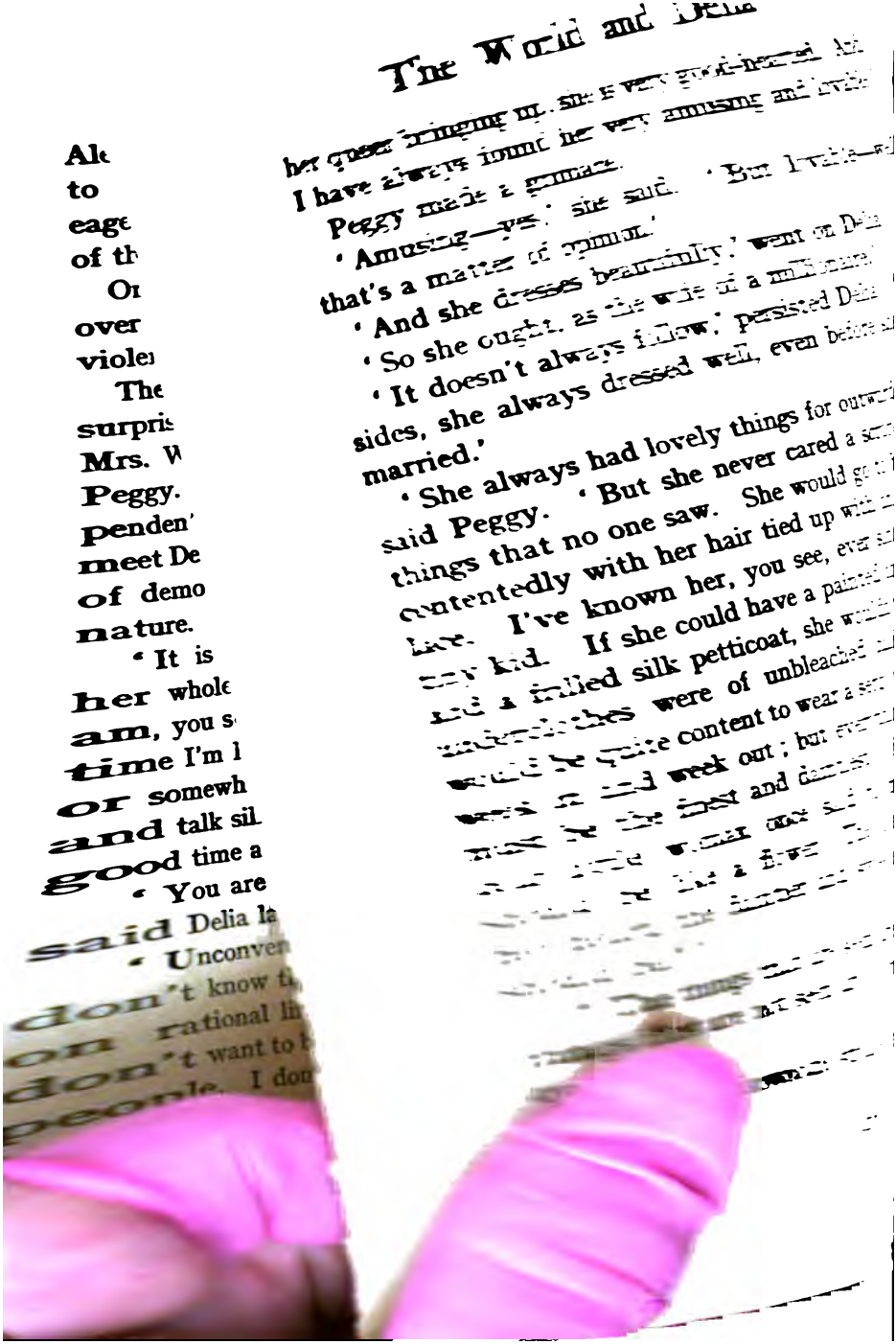
'"I want, I want—I don't know what I want",' quoted Peggy ruefully. 'And yet—yes, I do know, but I can't exactly put it into words. I don't want anything I've ever found yet, anyway. Sometimes I think I just want to be let alone. But I never am. I wish, sometimes, you'd let me come and stay with you. Minx says you have an awfully slow time. And that's just what I'd like.'

'I don't think I have a slow time,' said Delia quickly. 'I have a quiet time—or at least what Minx would call a quiet time.'

'Oh, well, you know what Minx is, and the queer mixed set she's been brought up in. As mother says you never know when you dine at the Crayshaws whether you'll sit next to the heir to a dukedom, or an arrived sausage-maker, or a second or third-rate actor. And most of the women you meet there seem to me either to be trying all they know to get into the papers, or all they know, and more, to keep out of the papers.'

Delia laughed.

'Poor old Minx,' she said. 'And yet, in spite of



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The World and Delia

her quite bringing up. She is very good-hearted, but I have always found her very amusing and invit Peggy made a pause.

'Amusing—yes,' she said. 'But I don't that's a matter of opinion.'

'And she dresses beautifully,' went on Delia

'So she ought, as the wife of a millionaire.

'It doesn't always follow,' persisted Delia sides, she always dressed well, even before married.'

'She always had lovely things for outwa said Peggy. 'But she never cared a sn things that no one saw. She would go contentedly with her hair tied up with a have. I've known her, you see, ever sin tiny kid. If she could have a painted a and a frilled silk petticoat, she would underclothes were of unbleached would be quite content to wear a sm week out; but every week in and week out, must be the best and dainty

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Peggy made a grimace.

'Amusing—yes,' she said. 'But lovable—well, that's a matter of opinion.'

'And she dresses beautifully,' went on Delia.

'So she ought, as the wife of a millionaire.'

'It doesn't always follow,' persisted Delia. 'Besides, she always dressed well, even before she was married.'

'She always had lovely things for outward show,' said Peggy. 'But she never cared a scrap for the things that no one saw. She would go to bed quite contentedly with her hair tied up with an old bootlace. I've known her, you see, ever since I was a tiny kid. If she could have a painted chiffon frock, and a frilled silk petticoat, she wouldn't care if her underclothes were of unbleached calico. Now, I would be quite content to wear a serge coat and skirt week in and week out; but everything underneath must be the finest and daintiest of its kind. As a dear little woman once said to me, "a woman should be like a flower. The nearer you get to her heart, the daintier and sweeter her wrappings should be."'

'"The things that are seen are temporal, but the things that are not seen are eternal,"' quoted Delia quaintly.

Just then Dinwoodie strolled up, and Peggy moved away.

'Come into the palm-house, Mrs. Carstairs,' he said. 'I want to show you a queer tropical plant that I think will interest you.'

Delia went willingly enough. For, as I have said, she found Dinwoodie a pleasant and sympathetic companion.

But as she ran upstairs to dress half an hour later, she met Minx coming down.

'You sly little puss,' said the latter, showing her pretty teeth in a malicious smile. 'So you've been taking advantage of the festive season to get up a flirtation with Mr. Dinwoodie, have you? *I* saw you in the palm-house, and pointed you out to your lawful proprietor.'

Delia flushed hotly.

'I wish you wouldn't be so silly, Minx,' she said, with more temper than she often showed.

'My dear, I am not silly. Dinwoodie's fearfully gone on you. He as good as told me so. As for flirting with him, I don't blame you. The iron-man wants waking up. I dare say he thinks his stalwart image blots out the rest of the universe for you. And it will do him all the good in the world to know it doesn't. As a matter of fact I wanted to flirt with Dinwoodie myself. But you've given the quietus to that. As moonlight to sunlight, as water to wine, as any other idiotic poetical simile you like, so are my charms to yours, you little wretch. I've a good mind to pay you out by carrying on with your Donald.'

'You can if you like,' said Delia shortly.

'Now don't lose its little temper,' said her hostess mockingly. 'Go and make itself pretty. I suppose you've promised Dinwoodie all the waltzes and extras.'

Without replying Delia went on her way to her own room.

When she was dressed, she went to see if she could help the aunts, whom she found resplendent in black velvet and old lace, and looking forward with subdued excitement to the evening's entertainment.

'Not that we shall dance, of course,' observed Aunt Sara, as she adjusted a bow on her becoming lace cap. 'We do not approve of to-day's fashion in dancing, as you know. But it will be very interesting to look on; and the theatricals are sure to be pleasing.'

The theatircals, however, proved less 'pleasing' than these dear old maidens anticipated. They were, in fact, a series of *tableaux vivants* of a particularly startling nature. The Misses Penfold were frankly shocked, and so were the elderly relatives of Peter, whom I have already mentioned.

When the curtain was finally rung down, and the applause was dying away, Minx, who had been a prominent performer, skimmed up to Carstairs, who was leaning against a pillar, gazing with unconscious moodiness at Delia and Dinwoodie, who were chatting in a corner, with every appearance of good comradeship.

'Well, knight of the stern and uncompromising mien,' she said gaily, as she came to an anchor beside him, 'didst like our performance?'

He looked at her for a second or two without speaking. Then he said:

'Do you want me to be polite—or frank?'

'I want you to be both, if you can. But you need not. I can see the tableaux did not meet with your august approval. You were shocked, weren't you?'

'I was—surprised,' he answered briefly.

'But why?'

'Does it want explanation?' he said, with a slight movement of his shoulders.

'Perhaps not,' she replied imperiously. 'But I insist.'

And she tapped an impatient foot against the parquet.

A queer look came into Carstairs' eyes as he said:

'I think I shouldn't insist, if I were you. Besides, if your husband doesn't object to that sort of thing, surely I have no right to do so.'

'Do you know, that is just what I was thinking,' she said, gravely.

Then she went into a fit of laughter.

'I always thought you were a bit of a prude,' she said, struggling for solemnity. 'I believe in a former existence you must have been a maiden aunt.'

'Perhaps I am a bit of a prude,' he said in a carefully expressionless voice.

She laughed again.

'Aren't you going to ask me to dance?' she demanded saucily. 'Or is dancing against your principles?'

'Quite the contrary. May I have your next disengaged waltz?'

'You may. It is the third from now. To be frank, I kept it for you. Honest Injun, I did. You needn't smile in that unbelieving fashion.'

'By the way, Mr. Carstairs,' she added, as she turned to go, 'I want to tell you something.'

'I am all attention,' he answered.

'It is—' she whispered provokingly, 'that I am awfully sorry for Delia.'

'I am sure she will appreciate your sympathy,' he answered quietly. 'I must not retaliate, must I, by saying that I am equally sorry for Dunstable?'

'Oh yes, you may,' she answered gaily. 'Sometimes I think he is rather sorry for himself, poor darling. I'm afraid I'm rather a responsibility. I think, you know,' she went on meditatively, 'that it would have been a better and more satisfactory arrangement if Peter had married Delia, and you had married me.'

'Really? You honour me,' he answered stiffly.

'Not at all,' was the airy rejoinder. 'Peter and I are tornadoes, in our respective ways. While you and Delia are two placid lakes, who have never been disturbed by a single storm. Peter would waken up Delia. And I, I flatter myself, would waken up you. And, by the way, you must have noticed how

Delia has wakened up, even without Peter's assistance. It must be gratifying to you to see how remarkably well the friendship between your wife and your friend is progressing.'

It was not altogether malice that prompted Minx to fling this tiny match among touchwood. It was pure devilment, born of the desire to see how Carstairs would look if he lost his temper.

He had hopelessly lost it now, if she had only known it. But he effectually concealed the fact, and only answered calmly :

'Yes, I'm glad they get on so well together.'

'Are you ?' she said. 'Are you really glad ? It must be nice to be able to disguise your feelings like that.'

With a slight bow, and rather a successful smile, he turned and left her, having had, for the time, quite as much as he could stand.

Delia and Dinwoodie were still talking, and the former was looking unusually animated and happy.

Carstairs was conscious of a dreary feeling of disappointment and pain.

Was Delia's life at Garrioch so dull, so devoid of all enjoyment ? Had the child only seemed content because she was trying to make the best of things ?

He wondered.

And as he wondered and chafed, and ate his heart out, the time went past, and he forgot all about the dance his hostess had kept for him. Which, all things considered, was unwise.

Chapter XIII

THE Misses Penfold distinctly did not approve of Minx and her 'set.'

'I always said,' observed Aunt Esther, as she carefully laid away her best cap on the evening of her return to Garrioch Towers, 'I always said, and I always will maintain, that that young person is no fit companion for Delia. And the set of people about her are like herself, I regret to say.'

'You mean—Mrs. Dunstable?' ventured her sister timidly.

'I mean Mrs. Dunstable, Sara. Whom should I be likely to mean?' was the lofty answer. 'I am sorry, very sorry for her unfortunate husband. He seems a worthy man, though his accent is peculiar, and evidently devoted to the heartless, light-minded wife the Almighty has seen fit to burden him with. I tell you, my dear sister, I was thankful to leave the place. It really seemed like being on visiting terms with Jezebel. And those private theatricals —or *tableaux vivants*, or whatever they were called— I do assure you I was one crimson blush from the crown of my head to the tips of my toes.'

'Yes, so was I,' agreed Aunt Sara, in a hushed voice. 'And really the language of the young people, and the way they behaved! Will you believe it, my dear, I actually saw, with my own eyes, Lady Jessie Lindagull and a young man and another young woman, sliding down the banisters! I thought I should have had a fit on the spot. And —I hardly like to tell you, Esther—but when I quietly but firmly remonstrated with them, they absolutely had the audacity to suggest that you and I—*you and I*, Esther!—should join in their undignified and ungraceful amusement, if amusement it could be called. Can you imagine us, my dear, taking part in such an exhibition?'

'Hardly,' replied Aunt Esther drily. 'A parcel of underbred tomboys. Ah, the poor dear Lancasters! If they knew what Crane Hall is degraded to, they would turn in their very graves.'

'I could see dear Donald did not approve of those shocking theatricals,' said Aunt Sara. 'He looked very quiet and almost stern all the evening.'

She paused, then continued:

'Esther, has it occurred to you—do you think that dear Donald is quite—happy?'

'Happy?' echoed her sister sharply. 'I suppose he is—at least I suppose he is as happy as married men ever are. I dare say the disturbance at the works worried him a good deal. Don't take fancies, Sara. You always were fanciful, you know.'

A few days later the two old ladies took their

departure; for they had begun to grow restless in the fear that things might be 'going wrong' at home.

'You know how flighty Jane is,' Aunt Esther said as she patted Delia's cheek graciously and condescendingly. 'And I dreamt last night that she had broken the pier-glass in the drawing-room.'

'All the more reason you shouldn't go home until you dream it's mended,' said Delia frivolously.

'My dear, don't be flippant,' said Aunt Sara in gentle reproof. 'Remember you are a married woman, with an example to set.'

Delia missed them a good deal, the more so that she saw little of her husband during the early days of the New Year. He went to the works directly after breakfast in the morning, and often did not return until late.

Also, a slight restraint had risen between them, real enough to be felt, but not enough to be explained.

Dinwoodie had gone, too, on the same day as the aunts, and Delia missed him more than she would have thought possible. In her talks with him she had learned more of her husband's character than she could have found out for herself; and Dinwoodie, being no coxcomb, had not misunderstood her frank pleasure in his companionship.

Then came the hurry and bustle consequent on sending the boys off to school. The house seemed strangely silent, deprived of their boisterous voices

and laughter; and Nan fretted visibly after her twin, and refused sympathy, even from Delia.

The new governess was a capable, hard-featured girl of about Delia's own age, but looking five or six years older. Delia was secretly rather afraid of her, and felt a humiliating sense of disgraceful ignorance as to dates and maps and even grammar.

So the days of January crept away, and February pushed her way forward with pale watery smiles.

Alec Dinwoodie took to coming down to Garrioch for week-ends. Some of these he spent at Garrioch Towers, and some at Crane Hall, where he had become a prime favourite.

The Hall was always full of guests, of all sorts and sizes, as Minx said. Few sections of London society were not represented, more or less, at the Dunstables'. Minx was a born hostess, and mingled her guests as skilfully as she mingled a salad. She provided plenty of amusement for the 'strangers within her gates'; but she never asked them what they wanted to do, or worried them to do one thing in preference to another. So that most of them had a really good time.

Sometimes she motored over to Garrioch, and carried off Delia for the night or the afternoon. Carstairs, who was always included in these sudden invitations, invariably declined.

Meanwhile, Delia's friendship with Berenice Edgecombe grew apace. Minx, seeing this, smiled and

shrugged her shoulders. And one day she said to Delia, in a somewhat meaning tone :

'Don't you think you are—to use a vulgar simile —cutting a stick to break your own back, my dear ? Have you never heard that the whole county expected Berenice Edgecombe and your Donald to make a match of it ?'

'Well,' answered Delia quietly, 'and what of it ? So long as Donald preferred to marry me.'

'Oh, all right, my child. If you like to play the sweet confiding innocent—why, do so. *I* don't mind. Only I think you are playing with fire.'

'You are a bit of a mischief-maker, Minx,' said Delia, in a sharp voice. 'Perhaps you don't mean it, but you are.'

'And you, my little Early-Victorian goose, are a bit of a star-dreamer, who, with your nose in the air, won't see what is lying close to your feet. I tell you—and it is for your own good—that, from all accounts, your Donald was in love with this fairy widow once, until you swam into his ken. And he may be again. Indeed, from what he told me himself——'

'What did he tell you ?' asked Delia coldly, as the other paused.

'Suppose,' went on Minx, with an air of reluctance—'suppose he had told me that he had once cared for her ?'

'He did not—he could not,' Delia cried out. 'Why should he say that to *you*, of all people ?

I don't believe it. Oh, Minx, do you *want* to make mischief between Donald and me ?'

Minx hummed a little tune.

'Nonsense, Delia, my dear. Mischief is not made ; it makes itself, or it would not be mischief. I simply warn you. Take the warning or not, as you please. As for your not believing me, I tell you it is true. Your Donald and I have had some very confidential talks while you have been occupied with your Dinwoodie.'

And with a rather spiteful little smile Minx vanished.

And though Delia did not believe her, the words remained with her, and clamoured for a hearing. Carstairs had wrapped himself up in even more than his former reserve and silence, and his young wife was too diffident to try to break through what promised to be an ever-increasing wall of estrangement.

One February afternoon—it was a Saturday—Delia was in the gardens, gathering some crocuses and snowdrops, when she saw Dinwoodie coming slowly up the avenue.

She was genuinely pleased to see him ; for of late her husband's varying moods had grieved and puzzled her, and Dinwoodie, as his friend and old-time chum, seemed the next best to her just then.

'Well, lady of the garden,' he said, as their hands met cordially, 'and how goes the world with you ?'

'My world always goes well, as yet,' she said, with a brave smile. 'At least, I think so.'

'Happy child!' he answered, stifling a sigh. 'Thrice happy child!'

Then he added in a different tone:

'You look very fresh and fair to-day.'

'Do I? Perhaps it is because I feel the promise of spring.'

'Perhaps. Won't you give me one of these pallid spring-flowers for my button-hole?'

'A snowdrop? No, I can't spare any. And the crocuses are stiff and ungraceful for button-holes.'

'It is the giver that lends them their charm,' he said lightly.

She smiled as she fastened a purple crocus in the lapel of his coat.

'You are talking like an old-fashioned hero in a novel,' she said.

'I'm afraid I should be an old-fashioned hero anywhere,' he answered ruefully.

As she looked up and he looked down, their eyes, naturally, met. And it was at this inauspicious moment that Carstairs came down the steps from the library, and turned across the east lawn.

He stood quite still for a moment or two; then swung round, and walked back to the house.

Dinwoodie watched him absently.

'The dear old boy looks hipped a bit,' he said. 'I hope you're good to him, you little will-o'-the-wisp of a thing?'

'I hope so,' she answered quietly. Then she added: 'Are you going to stay to-night?'

'No; I am staying for the week-end at Crane Hall. I like Dunstable. He is a regular good sort. But I shall probably inflict myself upon you next week. Now I must go in and have a chat with Carstairs.'

That same evening, after dinner, one of the servants tapped at the door of the schoolroom, where Delia was helping Nan with some brain-worrying problem of history.

'If you please, 'm,' said the girl, 'there's a man downstairs wants to see you, and he won't go away without he does. I think he's one of the men from the works, ma'am.'

'To see me?' repeated Delia. 'Are you sure it is not your master he wants to see?'

'No, 'm. He specially said Mrs. Carstairs.'

Delia rose.

'Where is he?' she asked.

'In the back hall, 'm. He's rather a rough-looking man, 'm.'

Delia went slowly downstairs, and in the back hall found a grimy, awkward giant, whom she at once recognised as the workman who had run against her on the day Donald had taken her to inspect the works.

'Good evening,' she said in her sweet clear young voice. 'You wanted to see me? Can I do anything for you?'

The man twirled his hat in his hands in sufficiently embarrassed fashion. Then he said hurriedly and sullenly:

'It's—it's about the boss.'

'Yes?' said Delia calmly, though a vague fear thrilled her at the man's expression, rather than his words. 'What about him? Do you want to see him?'

'No, little lady; it's you I want to see,' was the gruff answer. 'But it's this about him. I've no reason to consider him, the Lord knows. But I can't forget your gentle looks and pretty words that day I ran agin you at the works. "I hope I didn't hurt you," you sez, your pretty eyes like a new-fledged bird's. "I hope I didn't hurt you." Lord love you, it'd take more than three of your size to hurt Ben Garvice! I ain't forgot it—no, nor won't. But what I come to say is, that there's danger for the boss, and if you think aught of him—and as he's your man, happen you do—you'd best warn him.'

'Warn him? I don't understand. What do you mean?' said Delia faintly.

'I mean, miss—leastways, mum—that you won't let your man sit too near the window in his libery to-night about nine o'clock, or thereabouts. I'm only warning you—not for any love for the boss, for he's been a hard master and a cruel—but just for the sake of your bonnie eyes, and because—because I'm a domned fool, I suppose. No, I can't

tell you no more, mum. So I'll say good-night to you. But don't you give me away, little lady, or it'll be the worse for the boss.'

And clutching his hat, he made an agitated cross between a bow and a nod, and disappeared into the night.

Delia stood for a second or two as if turned to stone. Then she looked at her watch. It was ten minutes to nine.

With a little shiver, as though of cold, she made her way to the library.

The late post had just come in, and Carstairs was seated at the table, leisurely looking over his letters. The night was wonderfully mild for February, and the window was open.

Outside, the trees were waving dreamily under the kiss of a soft south breeze. A pale moon hung in the grey-blue sky. And one or two stars attended her.

Carstairs looked up as his wife entered. And she missed the tender indulgent expression his face had worn hitherto when she had invaded his sanctum.

'Well?' he said. And his voice sounded cold and preoccupied.

She came swiftly towards him, and said hurriedly:

'Don—do come into the drawing-room. I—I am lonely, all by myself.'

'I can't come just now. I am busy,' he answered, in a preoccupied tone.

She waited for a moment. Then said with a nervous attempt at a smile :

'You—you are sitting in a draught. Move your chair back a little. Please do, Don,' she added sharply, as she glanced at the clock.

'Nonsense,' he answered, with a swift contraction of his brows. 'I am used to draughts. Don't be silly.'

She laughed almost hysterically ; then dragged a chair between him and the window, and seated herself so that she faced him.

He looked at her in puzzled surprise.

'Now you are in a draught,' he said. 'Why, Delia, is anything the matter ? How nervous and excited you look !'

'No, no, Don,' she whispered agitatedly. 'I am not nervous—nor excited. And yet—perhaps I am. I have a strange presentiment of evil. Let me lay my head down on your shoulder, Don, and put your arms round me. The touch of your arms—of your —your lips, will perhaps drive away my stupid, meaningless fears. Don—you care for me a little, don't you ? Then hold me to you—lay your face against mine—just for a little while—a little, little while.'

The coldness melted from Carstairs' face, as he folded his arms round the slender trembling figure which clung to him so passionately, and ever and anon looked fearfully over its shoulder.

'What is it ?' he said, strangely moved and

touched. 'What are you afraid of, Delia? I don't understand. What is troubling you?'

She only shook her head without speaking. But her arms closed more tightly round him, her heart beat convulsively against his, her face was upturned, as though wooing his kisses.

Suddenly the sharp crack of a rifle rang through the night, and Carstairs was conscious of a stinging pain in his left shoulder.

With a sharp exclamation he sprang to his feet.

But Delia still clung to him like a dead weight, and would not be put aside. He tried vainly to disengage her clasping hands, but he could not.

'Delia,' he exclaimed fiercely, 'unloose your hands! Do you hear? Let me go!'

But she only clung closer.

At last he almost flung her aside, and rushed to the open window, and out on to the terrace. But though his keen eyes raked the lawns and the avenue, there was nothing to be seen. Nothing except Nipper, who, barking and growling fiercely, was darting in and out of the shrubbery.

And all at once two men sprang from among the thickly planted clumps of evergreens, and raced swiftly across the west lawn. Carstairs gave chase, but they had too good a start. Nipper gave chase, too, but a brutal kick from one of the fugitives sent him, sprawling and temporarily disabled, half-way across the avenue.

A sudden faintness came over Carstairs. He felt

curiously sick and giddy. The pain in his shoulder had become dull and insistent. Involuntarily he put up his hand, and as he withdrew it, it was wet and sticky.

'Damn!' he muttered, under his breath.

Then he stooped to pat Nipper, who had limped painfully to his master's feet.

Delia's light figure came flying down the long stretch of lawn.

'Don—Don—are you hurt? Have they hurt you?'

'Nothing much,' he said. 'But I am just a bit—giddy.'

As he spoke he steadied himself by laying his hand heavily on her shoulder.

'But you, child,' he went on hurriedly. 'You are not hurt, are you?'

'Oh no, no—not in the least.'

'You are quite sure?'

'Absolutely.'

Neither spoke again until they reached the house. Then Carstairs, his face rather white, sat down heavily on the sofa, and Delia, for the first time, saw that his shirt-front was deeply stained with blood. And that the stain was slowly spreading.

With a low cry, she sprang across the room to the bell, and rang it violently.

'Now don't get into a state, my dear,' he said quietly. 'There's very little harm done. But I may as well, perhaps, have Ferroll to look at my shoulder.'

'Did you—did you see them?' she gasped faintly.

'Yes,' was the grim answer.

Then, as a servant entered, he added sharply:

'Send Mrs. Batty to me, and tell one of the men to take the dog-cart, and bring Dr. Ferroll back with him.'

Delia hurried out of the room, and came back quickly with some brandy in a tumbler.

Carstairs drank it in a gulp, and gave her the tumbler again with a reassuring smile.

Then Batty bustled in, and Delia was sent away.

She gave some hasty directions to the servants, and ran upstairs to see that all was right in her husband's room. As she passed the door of the schoolroom Nan caught her skirt.

'Mumsey, what is it?' she said in a scared voice. 'Why is everybody rushing about as if something had happened? And why has Jenkins driven away in the dog-cart? I saw him out of the window.'

'There has been an accident,' said Delia, who was trembling violently. 'Your father—— Oh, Nan, he has been shot!'

'Shot!' screamed Nan, turning very white. 'Oh, Mumsey, he is not dead? Say he is not dead?'

'Hush, hush!' said her stepmother, in a dazed kind of voice. 'No, he is not dead, thank God! He says he is not much hurt. But we shall know when the doctor comes.'

'But who shot him?' sobbed Nan hysterically. 'Was it burglars, or what?'

'Some of the men from the works, I think,' was the incoherent answer. 'But oh, I hardly know. He was sitting at the library window—and it was open—and, oh, Nan, I feel so strange, so weak! Don't leave me, dear. I shall be all right presently. But it was so near—so near.'

And she broke into a violent fit of shivering sobs. And Nan cried, too, for sheer terror.

Dr. Ferroll, however, who arrived with almost incredible celerity—Jenkins having caught him in the nick of time—confirmed Carstairs' own verdict that the wound was not immediately serious, and that with ordinary care there was no reason to fear inflammation. The chief danger was from the loss of blood; for the wound was a nasty and a ragged one, and had bled profusely.

When Carstairs was comfortably in bed, the old doctor went to reassure Delia, whom he found, pale and trembling, in the morning-room with Nan.

'No serious damage, my dear Mrs. Carstairs,' he said, with a kindly glance at Delia's white young face. 'A day or so in bed, and perfect quiet, and then I hope he will be quite himself again—or very nearly—very nearly. He's lost a lot of blood, you see. But we've got the bullet, and an absurdly big, old-fashioned one it was. He tells me you were with him when the shot was fired, and he's very anxious lest you should have been hit, too. So I've promised to overhaul you thoroughly. He says the bullet must have grazed you. No? Well,

that's all the better. Perhaps you had better go up to him, and set his mind at rest. Between you and me, I've been afraid for some time of some hostile demonstration on the part of his workmen. He's a good master, you know, but stubborn, and —well, well, I dare say he acts for the best. May you help to nurse him? Why, certainly. But he won't want much nursing, and Mrs. Batty will be able to do all that is necessary. Now, good-night. I will come over in the morning. Cheer up, my dear young lady, there is no need for such pale cheeks and doleful looks. Your husband will be up and about in a very short time—a very short time, I hope.'

And the kind old man bustled away.

Delia went slowly upstairs, and into her husband's room.

He looked very pale, and somewhat exhausted, but otherwise much as usual.

As she advanced towards the bed, he held out his hand to her with a faint smile.

'Have you seen Ferroll?' he asked anxiously. 'You are sure you are not hurt at all? Does he say you are all right?'

'I am absolutely unhurt,' she answered, with a soothing pat of the hand she held. 'The bullet did not even graze me.'

And she shuddered.

'Are you in great pain?' she asked, making an effort to speak steadily.

'No, my dear, nothing to speak of. As it happens, I am not seriously hurt at all. It was touch and go, though. Do you know, little woman,' he went on in an agitated voice, 'that your unusual fit of affection in all probability saved my life? And that you were within an ace of losing your own? My God—what an escape for you!'

'Hush, hush, Don; you must not get excited!' she said, kneeling down, and leaning her head against his pillow. 'Try not to think about it. I am not a bit hurt, and Dr. Ferroll says you will soon be all right if you are careful. Now I hear Batty coming to send me away. I shall leave my door open, so that I shall hear you if you want me.'

'Kiss me, dear,' he said, looking up at her with heavy eyes.

Very shyly, she bent and touched his cheek with her lips. But he drew her closer, until his lips met hers.

Nevertheless, in the long weary night, as he tossed and turned feverishly, his jealous doubts returned, and his thoughts ran continually, not on the attempt on his own life, nor even on the danger that had momentarily threatened Delia, but on two figures in a garden, a man's and a woman's, who looked into one another's eyes in the pale spring sunshine, and who murmured words he could not hear, and seemed oblivious of all things save each other. And that was only a few hours ago.

The events of the evening had driven his jealousy and resentment into the background, but now both returned in full force. Jealousy, we know, generates in its victims a paradoxical delight in self-torture; and Carstairs spent a wretched night. By midnight he had fully persuaded himself that his wife and his friend were violently in love with one another, and that he was, necessarily, the barrier to their happiness. And the sickening thought gradually took possession of him that Delia's unusual demonstrativeness on the previous evening had only been a blind. And yet, his better self cried out against such a suspicion against his innocent young wife.

'Poor child!' he murmured, as he flung about on his pillows; 'she is not to blame. It is only I who have been a fool—and I dare say Dinwoodie is not to blame, either. How could any man help caring for her?' And so on, and so on, all through the dragging hours until the dawn. And then he fell into an uneasy doze.

Delia did not sleep at all. She lay half-dressed on her bed, gazing, wide-eyed, at the firelit ceiling, and thinking of her husband's good-night kiss. He had said she had in all probability saved his life. And she knew that she had. But she would never tell him. At least, not now, not yet.

She was just beginning to feel drowsy when she was roused to alertness by her husband's voice muttering rapidly and feverishly. Her heart beat in unreasoning terror.

She rose, flung on her dressing-gown, and hurried into the adjoining room, where Batty was just replenishing the fire. Batty's stout comfortable figure and placid face seemed to promise security from all anxiety and trouble, and Delia caught her substantial arm with a feeling of relief and safety.

'Batty,' she whispered anxiously. 'Is he worse?'

'Not he, my lamb,' was the comforting answer. 'He's just a bit feverish, and no wonder, the way the doctor poked and pulled till he got the bullet out. He'll be all right. So just lay your pretty head on your pillow, and try to sleep.'

'I can't,' said the girl nervously. 'My head aches so. And my heart beats so hard I can't lie still.'

'Delia,' muttered a fretful voice from the bed, 'Delia, where are you?'

'Here, dear,' she said, moving swiftly towards him. 'Do you want me?'

But he gazed at her with unrecognising eyes.

'Won't she come?' he said somewhat bitterly. 'Ah, I thought not. She is otherwise engaged, I suppose. Our marriage was a mistake, you know, a ghastly, awful mistake all round. She's come to see it, and so have I—God help us both!'

Then his voice trailed off into incoherent mutterings.

Delia felt her face grow white and stiff. A cold deadly perspiration seemed to break out over her cheeks and forehead.

She glanced at Batty, but the old woman had gone to the further end of the room and had heard nothing.

'Batty,' she said, raising her voice slightly, 'you are right. I—I shall be better in bed. Let me know if you want me.'

And she went swiftly out of the room, closing the door behind her. But she could not shut out the sound of that hoarse distressed voice, now rising, now falling, now dying away into silence.

She threw herself on her bed again ; but she had no thought of sleep. The blood in her veins seemed turned to fire. All her slowly-awakened love for her husband seemed burnt up in a mad unreasoning fury of resentment. What was it Minx had said, that 'all the county had expected that Donald would have married Berenice Edgecombe ?' No, someone else had said that, she thought distractedly. Minx had said that Donald had told her he had once cared for Berenice. And she—Delia—had come between. Ah, how she wished she might die ! But she knew that death, as a rule, while delighting to pluck away the beloved and the happy, keeps aloof from the unloved and the wretched.

All through the long, weary hours she pictured Donald happy with Berenice had she—Delia—only let him alone. That was how she put it.

Sore and angry though she was, she did not blame Berenice. Nor did she blame her husband. At least he had never deceived her, had never

pretended that he loved her. He had only been sorry for her. He had pitied her, and she, wretched girl, had taken advantage of his pity.

She recalled how, only to-night, he had spoken lightly of her 'fit of affection' having saved his life. She recalled his confused ravings just now, when he had said their marriage had been a mistake. She remembered how she had gladly submitted to his kiss. And she buried her head in her pillow in frantic shame and humiliation.

If she only might go away. If she only might go back to the quiet monotony of her old life with the aunts. If these grey days had been empty of pleasure, at least they had been equally empty of pain.

The child-Delia passed away for ever in the hours of that never-to-be-forgotten night. And there arose in her place a quiet, tired-looking woman, whose eyes seemed to have said good-bye to youth and laughter for all time.

And it happened, during the afternoon, while her new bitter mood was yet strong upon her, that Minx motored over from the Hall. For the news had flown like wildfire.

'Good gracious, my dear Delia!' exclaimed the newcomer in a voice of genuine horror. 'What horrible thing is this about your Donald being shot at? I almost had a fit when I heard it. How is he? Is he unconscious? Is he delirious? Is he very weak? I always knew these horrible work-

people would be revengeful and all that. Peter was saying only lately that your Donald would have to pay for his firmness and obstinacy about the wages. But Peter thinks he is quite right to stick to his convictions. But it is a ghastly affair. Why, you poor dear, you might have been a widow. Poor Berenice Edgecombe is fearfully upset about it, I understand. Of course, it is only natural, all things considered. Dinwoodie stayed with us last night, and this morning he went down to Rowan Cottage—you know he and Mrs. E. have been sworn chums since the dark ages. He came back quite concerned about her; said she was quite hysterical. Of course, you know—yes, I think I told you—that she and your Donald just missed running in double harness. She's a nice little thing, and quite pretty. But I don't quite catch on to what men see in her. Do you?'

Delia listened in frozen silence. And when at last Minx gave her a chance to speak, she said:

'I think my husband is not seriously hurt. It might have been rather dreadful, of course. But as it is, there is nothing to be alarmed at.'

'Well, when he is all right again, I want you to come over to the Hall for a bit. You look like a wet curl-paper. I'm having some jolly people week after next. So bring all your prettiest frocks, and you shall have a ripping good time, I promise you. We'll give you a look in at the real world; the happy-go-

lucky, let-it-rip, go-as-you-please old world, my little puritan of the Early-Victorian era.'

As Minx was whirled out of sight, Batty touched Delia respectfully on the arm.

'The master seems restless and in a good deal of pain, Mrs. Carstairs. I thought perhaps you might go up to him.'

'Has he asked for me?' inquired Delia.

'Well, not exactly, my lamb. But he asked where you were.'

Delia had not seen Carstairs since the doctor's visit in the early morning.

And when she went into his room now, their eyes met silently. And in that brief challenge war was declared.

Chapter XIV

CARSTAIRS was soon up and about again ; and except that he was somewhat paler and even more silent than usual, seemed quite his old self.

On the first day of his return to the works he sent for two of the men from the rolling-mill, Johnson and Scott.

After some delay, Scott appeared alone. He was a scowling, bull-necked fellow, rather under than over the middle height. He kept scrupulously near the door ; and a close observer might have seen that his scowl concealed a look of unmistakable fear, and that his big hairy hands were trembling.

Carstairs was leaning back in his chair, carefully sharpening a pencil.

'Where is Johnson ?' he asked, glancing at the man, and then resuming his occupation.

'*I* don't know where he is,' was the sullen answer. 'I ain't seen a sign of him since he first come in this morning—strike me dead if I have. I wish I'd never set eyes on him at all.'

Carstairs struck a small hand-bell that stood on the table.

'Send Mr. Lester to me,' he said to the boy who appeared in answer to the summons.

'Yes, sir.'

And the boy vanished.

Mr. Lester came in almost immediately. He was an old man, and had been foreman ever since Carstairs could remember.

'Where is Johnson?' asked the latter curtly.

'He can't be found, sir. He came in with the other men this morning. But he hasn't been seen since.'

Then he added somewhat nervously,

'I hope you'll forgive the liberty I'm taking, Mr. Donald, but I can't help thinking it's a great mistake your not letting the police go into this affair. It does no good being lenient with these blackguards. These two men, this fellow and Johnson, have been stirring up discontent among the men for more than a year past. Your life's not safe, sir, as you've surely reason to know, unless you make an example of them.'

And the old man's voice trembled. For he had adored 'Master Donald' since the latter's babyhood.

'It's all right, Lester,' Carstairs said almost affectionately. 'I'd like to manage this matter my own way. I'll see you later.'

And Lester felt himself dismissed.

'Now, Scott,' said the master of the works sharply, as the door closed behind the foreman. 'Perhaps you'll explain matters.'

A look of stupid bewilderment came over the other's face, as he moved awkwardly from one foot to another.

'I don't know what you mean, sir,' he muttered.

'I have been a fairly good master to you, I think,' went on Carstairs in a leisurely voice that scared the man before him much more than any bullying would have done, because he did not know exactly what it portended. 'Except in the matter of refusing to raise your wages, and insisting upon certain rules and regulations, I don't think I have been hard upon you.'

'I've a wife and family to keep, and the pay I'm getting ain't enough,' began Scott sullenly.

Here he stopped, remembering a time, not so very long ago, when scarlet fever had invaded his cottage, and when numberless baskets of delicacies had been sent from the Towers until all was well again. He also remembered a time, further back, when he himself had been laid up with a broken ankle, and when 'the boss' had paid his wages regularly, and kept his place open, until he could go to work again.

But these, and other like incidents, had been blurred and rendered indistinct in the glamour of weekly meetings at The Blue Harp, where masters in general, and Donald Carstairs in particular, had been denounced as tyrants and oppressors, and mortal enemies of the down-trodden and long-suffering working-man.

During the silence that followed his last speech Scott pulled his cap this way and that; then said doggedly:

'As to the shooting business, I did it, and I ain't going to deny it. Nor I ain't going to cut it like Johnson has—though we'd both have cut it next day, if we'd knowed you'd recognised us. We'd drawed lots, and it fell to Johnson and me. Johnson was mad drunk, and I'd had just enough to make me careless-like.'

'And what was your object?' asked Carstairs. 'Did you intend to kill me, or what?'

'No, no, governor. Straight—we didn't mean no more than to scare you, and let you know that we wasn't to be trifled with. But Johnson, he was too drunk to hold the gun straight, and I couldn't rightly take aim because of the young mistress.'

Carstairs' face grew very white.

'Do you realize,' he said sternly, 'that but for a mere chance you might have killed her?'

'No, no, governor, there weren't no chance of that. I can bring down a bird as many yards away as most men. So I made either to hit your shoulder, which I did, or to fire to the left of you.'

'And suppose you had killed either of us, what then?'

'Why, then, sir, I don't deny that I'd have cut it, as Johnson has. But as you weren't hurt to speak of, I hope as how you'll take a lenient view, and——'

'And let you go free, in order to give you an opportunity of doing further damage whenever opportunity occurs?'

'No, no, sir. I don't expect to be kept on, it isn't in reason. I knew that, when I woke the next morning with a head fit to split, and the feelin' that I'd done for myself as far as work here goes.'

Carstairs glanced at his watch, and said slowly:

'Now look here, Scott. I sent for you, because I want to have half an hour's straight talk with you. You know, of course, that I could have you and Johnson arrested for that night's work; but after a good deal of thought I have decided otherwise. You and Johnson, I understand, have been the ringleaders in nearly all the disturbances that have occurred during the past year or so. You have incited the men to discontent and rebellion, you have given me an infernal lot of trouble, and altogether made things very unpleasant. Finally, you prowl about my grounds with fire-arms, and with the cowardly intention of shooting me if you get the chance. As for only intending to scare me, that's all rot. You meant killing, and you came within an ace of it.'

Scott turned purple, and was understood to mumble that he earnestly desired to be struck dead if such had been his intention.

'Yes, we know all about that,' said Carstairs coolly. 'Now, in these circumstances, I don't see

any particular reason why I should be lenient to you. Do you ?'

Receiving no answer, he went on :

'On the other hand, you are a good workman, and comparatively sober, and—what is more to the point to me just now—you have a strong influence over other the men. Supposing, then, that I look over this—this incident, what guarantee have I that the incident might not be repeated ? How do I know that you may not go on sowing discontent among your fellow-workmen, and making amicable relations all but impossible between them and me ?'

An expression of mingled amazement and bewilderment that was almost ludicrous crossed Scott's coarse features.

'You—you don't really mean it, governor ? You don't mean you'd keep me on ? Why, it ain't in reason—it ain't human.'

'I repeat, in such a case,' went on Carstairs, 'what concession are you ready to make on your side ? Remember, I shall stick to what I have said about the wages and the working-hours—for the present. You have, I grant you, lower wages and longer hours than Blank and Co., but, on the other hand, you have higher wages and shorter hours than Hyphen and Son. As time goes on, I may make different arrangements, especially in the cases of the older hands. But I make no promises. If you decide to remain on, and to sign this paper—you can read, can't you ? Yes, I thought so. Well

in the case of your agreeing to my terms, I shall not put the law in action as to your attempt on my life. For it was neither more nor less ; so we won't have any fairy-tale versions of the matter.'

Scott scratched his head in deep thought as he slowly and laboriously read through the paper Carstairs handed to him. Then he said :

'Well, governor, I'm agreeable. There ain't nothing here that I make any objections to—in the light of you looking over things in the handsome way you say. And about Johnson, sir ?'

'If Johnson turns up I shall make the same terms with him,' was the brief answer.

(Johnson, however, never did turn up, having made up his mind that the mother country was too small for him and his ambitions. So America received him a little later ; and, having presumably turned over a succession of new leaves, he prospered there.)

'Then, boss, it's done with you,' said Scott, his rough voice strained and eager. 'And s'help me if I don't think all the more of you for stickin' to your own ideas in spite of everything. You're a plucked 'un, sir, I will say that for you.'

The paper was duly signed and witnessed, and Jerry Scott went out among his fellow-men in a maze of remorseful perplexity.

Ben Garvice and he met at The Blue Harp that evening. Ben was surly and unapproachable, and showed a decided distaste for his former's chum's company.

'I know I've been as bad as any of you,' he said sullenly, as he refused Scott's offer of a drink. 'But I've been thinking things over, and I don't want no truck with assassins and murderers. As pretty as a pink, she is, and as innercent as a baby, is the little London lady up at the Towers—the boss's wife, I mean. And no 'arm shan't come to her or her man if I know it. You and the other chaps can go your own ways. After this I side with the boss. So there's my last word.'

'Ben,' answered Scott, in such unwontedly subdued fashion that the other stared at him in surprise, 'I've bin havin' a long talk with the boss, I have. And I don't mind telling you, Ben Garvice, that from now on, I'm on the boss's side too. He's forgave me, Ben, s'help me if he hasn't. And he's made terms with me, and I've took them. And I'm domned sorry I ever went agin him. And if you won't drink with me, you won't, Ben, and there's an end of it. I'm going to do with a heap less drink than I did. Drink's made a fool of me more than once, it has. And I'm none so wedded to it that I can't put the pin in when I say the word.'

Ben Garvice looked at him for a second or two in silence; then brought his huge fist down on the counter with a bang that made the glasses dance.

'Jerry Scott,' he growled, 'you're a man, and you've spoken like a man, and I'm with you. And we're both on the boss's side.'

Carstairs felt curiously tired and dispirited when he got home that evening.

Delia had not come to meet him, as she had always done before his illness ; and when she came into the drawing-room before dinner, there was a chilly aloofness about her manner that hurt him, and deepened his depression. Possibly he was unaware how forbidding his own manner had been during his convalescence.

When dinner was over, and Nan had gone to bed, Delia went to the library.

Carstairs was lying back in his chair, one hand pressed over his eyes. Nipper, with his nose upon his paws, lay at his feet.

As Delia came into the room her husband rose, and wheeled forward a chair.

'Are you busy ?' she said formally.

'Not overwhelmingly so,' he answered with a slight smile. 'Why ? Do you want me ?'

'I want you—I mean Minx wants me—I should like to go over to Crane Hall for a week or ten days,' she said.

He rose and busied himself with the lamp.

'Yes ?' he said, after a pause.

'Shall you mind ? Do you object ?' she went on, struck by something in his tone. 'Should you rather I did not go ?'

'Object ?' he repeated. 'Certainly not. Why should I ? Go, by all means. It must be dull for you here. I have seen it.'

'Have I ever complained of being dull?' she said quickly.

'Oh, no,' he answered in a quiet voice. 'Oh, no.'

'I may go, then?' she persisted. 'You do not care?'

He laughed.

'My dear Delia, you know painfully little of the world. What other wife of to-day, I wonder, would dream of asking her husband's permission to do or leave undone anything that caught her fancy? Go and stay with your friend, by all means.'

'You will not—miss me?' she said slowly.

'I shall probably not realise that you have gone until you come back,' he answered.

He was lighting a cigarette over the lamp. His back was towards her, and his voice sounded calm and unemotional.

A wild desire seized her to fling herself into his arms, and tell him that she did not want to go, that she would be miserable away from him.

But when he turned round, and she saw the impassive coldness of his face, her heart failed her, and she only said falteringly:

'I shall go the day after to-morrow, then?'

'Please yourself, my dear,' he answered in a slightly bored tone.

And taking up the day's paper, he became apparently absorbed in its contents.

She looked at his averted profile for a second or

two in silence; then without further speech, went out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Carstairs flung his paper upon the hearthrug, and his cigarette into the fireplace.

'So,' he muttered under his breath, 'this is the beginning! God, what a blind fool I have been!'

And he leaned his elbows on his knees, and hid his face in his hands.

Day by day his love for his young wife had grown deeper and stronger. And with her ever-growing coldness to him it had increased fourfold. He loved her, he wanted her, his heart clamoured for her continually. But his pride forbade that he should force his unwelcome love on this child-wife whose heart had only now been awakened to what love meant—awakened not by him, but by his 'own familiar friend.'

He was suffering very keenly, though silently. For the passion of a man no longer in his first youth has an element of tragedy in it. We are apt to be exaggeratedly sorry for the griefs of the young, because they are young, and because, as a rule, they are so strenuously and loudly sorry for themselves.

But surely the griefs of those who have said goodbye to their youth are more pathetic, if only because it is pretty certain that sympathy will, in a measure, be denied them.

Chapter XV

On a particularly dull and dreary afternoon in March, Nan was sitting by the fire in the big draughty hall, listening to the wind moaning eerily through the corridors and staircases. The sound had always had a weird fascination for her.

The hall at Garrioch Towers was a favourite resort of Nan's, especially in cold wet weather. And to-night it was both.

The quaintly carved ceiling, and mysterious stained-glass windows, darkened it, and created an atmosphere of never-ending twilight. Queer old straight-backed ebony chairs inlaid with hideous ivory figures yellow with age, stood about in dark corners. Being the acme of discomfort, they were never used for the purpose for which chairs are supposed to be made. But Nan was never tired of studying them, and inventing histories for these oddly shaped figures.

Old portraits, blackened and indistinct, hung round the oak-panelled walls. The firelight touched them here and there, and lit into unwonted expression the faces of dead and gone Carstairs'. Faded old

rugs were flung about on the stone-flagged floor, and a high heavy screen shut off the draughts that always swirled down the wide shallow staircase that led to the galleries above.

Nipper lay on Nan's lap, fast asleep, but with one eye partially open.

'Old Torpey's' successor, Miss Bumpus, had gone for the day, and Lulu was curled up beside her sister, gazing drowsily into the leaping flames.

'I can see things in the fire, Nan,' she was murmuring. 'I can see Mumsey and father and me, and Nipper and you, and nasty old Torpey. Nan, why has Mumsey gone away? Is she tired of being here?'

'I don't know,' Nan answered somewhat sadly.

For it was a question she had asked of herself many times during the last few days. She missed her stepmother at every turn, and the house seemed to have gone back to the old dreary time before Delia came.

Carstairs rarely took any notice of his little daughters now. Once, since Delia's departure, they had ventured into the study to say good-night to him; but he had dismissed them abruptly, and without any of the kindly words which of late they had come to look upon as their right from him. And so they also had crept back into their shell of reserve again.

Children are so easily repulsed, poor little souls! especially when they have grown up in an atmo-

sphere of neglect and repression, as these children had done.

'Will she come back again, Nan?' went on Lulu, tenderly smoothing the remnants of her vagabond doll's hair.

'Oh yes, you little silly, of course she'll come back again,' was the impatient answer—all the more impatient because the speaker was not altogether sure of her facts.

'But how do you know?' persisted Lulu. 'The other Mumsey went away, and never came back. You said so. You said she just had time to kiss me good-bye, and then flew away and was an angel.'

'Yes, but she died, you know,' said Nan in a low voice.

'Perhaps new Mumsey's dead,' exclaimed Lulu in an alarmed voice. 'Oh, doodness!—don't want her to be dead!' And her big round eyes filled with heavy tears. 'Want her to come back this very minute. Want her to squeeze me in her arms, and kiss me. Oh, *doodness!*'

'But she will come back soon,' said Nan consolingly. 'Don't you remember she said she would?'

'Want her to come back now—to-night,' wailed Lulu, flinging her long-suffering doll afar off on a distant rug.

'Hush, here's father!' whispered Nan, as a step sounded on the staircase.

And a moment later the master of the house came round the corner of the screen.

The children rose hurriedly, and prepared for flight.

'Don't go, little ones,' said Carstairs, in an unwontedly gentle voice. 'You are not afraid of me surely?'

'Sometimes afraid of you,' answered Lulu, winking the tears from her eyes as she once more captured her vagrant child. 'Sometimes *awf-ully* afraid of you.'

Her father sank into a chair by the hearth, and held out his hand invitingly. Lulu sidled towards him, then sidled half-way back again; and by repeating this process once or twice, at last arrived at his knee. He lifted her up, and she sat there contentedly enough, while Nan resumed her place on the rug, and Nipper once more relapsed into slumber.

'Have you dot a headache?' inquired Lulu, after watching Carstairs' somewhat gloomy face for some time in silence.

'No,' was the brief answer.

'Then are you lonely without Mumsey?' proceeded the child curiously.

No suitable answer occurring to him, he made none.

'Why aren't you nicer?' continued Lulu, playing roughly with her victim's watch-chain.

'Nicer?' he echoed, looking somewhat bewildered.

'Yes.' This with a succession of violent nods of her curly head. 'Had better be nicer, or Nan and me will have to go away, too, and then you will be lonely more.'

A deep flush swept over Carstairs' face. And Nan, seeing it, said hastily:

'Lulu, you know it's naughty to say things like that.'

But Lulu only bounced up and down, and waved her doll in close proximity to her father's head.

'So—you think I might be nicer?' he said slowly.

'Yes, might be nicer,' was the glib answer. 'And Nan thinks it, too, and——'

'Oh, father, don't believe her!' Nan cried out in passionate denial. 'I never said it. I——'

'You only thought it, eh, Nan?' he said quietly. 'Well, I've no doubt you were both quite right.'

'Both twite right,' echoed Lulu, with provoking complacence.

'And in what way do you think I might be nicer, my little daughters?' Carstairs asked, after a pause.

'Oh, father, please don't speak like that!' implored Nan. 'You are nice—at least, nearly always—sometimes, I mean. You were before Christmas.'

'Then quite suddenly got cross and horrid,' supplemented Lulu. 'Batty scolds me when I'm cross and horrid.'

'Well, suppose you scold me,' suggested her father, with a short laugh.

'Oh no, couldn't. 'Cause you look sorry,' crooned the child. 'Batty never scolds us when we're sorry, or neither does Mumsey.'

'Mumsey never scolds us at all,' put in Nan indignantly.

'Yes, once did,' affirmed Lulu, 'when I put Nipper in the bath, and turned on the hot water. And Nipper cried, and Mumsey held my hand just for a wee minute under the hot water, and I yelled.'

'That was very naughty,' Carstairs said gravely.

'Naughty of Mumsey?' inquired the little one, opening her eyes.

'No, naughty of you.'

'Afterwards said was sorry,' observed the delinquent in cheerful tones. 'And Mumsey gave me a caramel.'

Nan had crept closer to Carstairs, and was now leaning lightly against his knee.

She was an affectionate little creature, and as I have said, her reserved, often stern father was one of her idols.

'Batty loves Mumsey,' resumed Lulu, who was in a loquacious mood. 'She says she's a blessing to the place. *You* don't love Mumsey much, do you?'

'You are a little chatterbox, aren't you?' he said, stroking her rebellious hair.

'Yes, I know. But *do* you love Mumsey?'

'Yes, my dear; of course I do.'

'And does Mumsey love you?'

'I hope so,' he answered briefly.

'Perhaps doesn't,' the child said, wagging her head solemnly. 'Perhaps went away because didn't.'

'She does!' burst out Nan, with flashing eyes. 'I know she does.'

Somewhat to her surprise, her father drew her to him suddenly and kissed her. Then lifting Lulu from his knee, he crossed the hall to the library, and shut himself in.

After his solitary dinner—for the children had had their meals with Batty since Delia's departure—while Carstairs was pacing up and down the firelit library, a hesitating tap came to the door, and Nan stole across the threshold.

'Well, Nan,' he said, stopping short in his restless promenade, 'what is it?'

She ran towards him with a strange little cry.

'Oh, father, I'm lonely!' she sobbed. 'I'm so lonely! Let me stay beside you for a little while. I won't disturb you. I won't even speak. And I'll keep quite still.'

He drew her into the room, and closed the door.

'Why, Nan,' he said gently. 'Poor little woman, so you are lonely, are you?'

But she did not speak; only sobbed. And he sat down in a big easy-chair by the fire, and lifted her on his knee.

After a long time he said:

'I haven't been much of a father to you, have I, little girl?'

She crept closer to him, and stole a thin arm round his neck.

'Oh, father, if you'd only let me love you,' she whispered. 'I would do *anything* for you. But when you look at me like you sometimes do, I'm afraid, and——'

She stopped uncertainly.

He pressed his lips together in silence. For he remembered Delia's words in the wood, months ago.

'You make me nervous and afraid of you,' she had said, 'as you have made your own children afraid of you.'

'My little daughter, he said, 'you must not let fancies like that take hold of you. I'm sorry that you should be afraid of me. I dare say I haven't taken very mucb notice of any of you. I don't know why. To tell you the truth, I don't understand children, and, though it may seem strange, I feel—ill at ease among you all. But, my dear, I want to—to do my duty to you and the others. And—perhaps you will help me, Nan. You will soon be no longer a child, you know. You are only five years younger than—than my wife.'

'Yes, I know. Oh, father, she is so sweet. I do love her. Don't you?' Then as he did not answer she went on hurriedly. 'And she loves you, father, I believe she just adores you.'

Her face was buried in his neck, and she did not see the bitter smile that curved his lips.

'Will she come back soon?' she asked timidly, as he did not speak.

'I don't know,' was the curt answer.

There was another long silence. Then Nan moved restlessly.

'I wish I might just say something,' she murmured.

'Well, child, say on. Unless you are still afraid of me,' he added with a short laugh.

She twisted one of the buttons of her frock uneasily; then blurted out:

'I think Mumsey isn't happy because she thinks you don't care for her.'

'Yes?' he said calmly. 'What reason have you for thinking so?'

'I don't know. But I do think so,' was the almost inaudible answer.

'Little girls often have mistaken ideas,' he said, as he put her down and rose somewhat hurriedly to his feet. 'Your stepmother and I understand each other perfectly. If, as you say, she is unhappy, it is not because of the reason you imagine——'

He stopped, and put up his hand to his collar, as though it choked him.

'But, father,' she said, clinging to his hand, and looking up wistfully into his face, 'you are not happy either, and—I want you to be.'

He stooped, and with a light caressing gesture touched her untidy hair.

'Don't worry your little head about things you don't understand, Nan,' he answered. 'I'm quite as happy as I deserve to be. Perhaps happier, as far as that goes. Now, I think it's about your bedtime, isn't it? Good-night, child. Sleep well, and leave other people's worries to take care of themselves.'

'Good-night, father. May I come for a little while every night until Mumsey cames back?' she asked falteringly.

'Certainly, my dear, if it gives you any special gratification. But I dare say you won't find me a very cheerful companion.'

She held up her face uncertainly for his kiss, and stole away into the twilight of the great hall, and up the moonlit staircase, until she disappeared, like a small ghost, into the shadows beyond.

Somehow, it had never before occurred to Carstairs to study the characters of his children. Between him and his sons there had always been an unspoken but determined hostility. They had defied him when they dared; and he, for his part, had been heartily glad when circumstances kept them out of his way.

Of the girls he had taken but scant notice. Nan had hitherto been nothing to him but a rather sullen-looking little girl, with no personal attractions to nullify her evidently disagreeable temper. Lulu

had always appeared to him as a very rude and generally unaccountable young person whose society was better avoided.

But to-night, as he smoked and brooded after Nan had left him, it seemed to him that it was possible he had been mistaken in them all.

It was quite true, as Lulu had, with more frankness than politeness, told him, that he had been very far from 'nice' to the four human beings who owed him their existence. Doubtless they had their good points. Delia had come to love them, and they had come to love her. Possibly he had been to blame all along.

This wild, sullen-looking Nan, for instance, who had always reminded him of an unkempt, untamed colt, had shown him that she was, like most wild things, amenable to kind looks and words. Perhaps the others were too, in their respective ways.

But after all, he thought wearily, what did it matter? Evidently he was not calculated to win love, or even affection, like other men. And indeed, he had never specially desired to do so until lately.

Delia was not very far from the truth in thinking that he had been mainly influenced by pity when he first spoke to her of marriage. He had intended to play the part of a minor Providence to this young girl whose life had seemed so barren of all happiness. The knowledge that there was no love between them had seemed to him rather an advantage than otherwise. His days for love-making were over, he had

told himself; and as for her, he had supposed that as the years went on she would develop for him the placid tender affection that all sweet good women eventually bestowed, apparently, on their respective husbands—given that the husbands were averagely kind and indulgent. But he had never contemplated the possibility of her caring for any other man—least of all, Dinwoodie.

His wife and his friend, he thought bitterly. Well, it was a well-worn story enough.

Of course you think he was a fool to jump to such a disastrous conclusion when he had so little to go upon? Well, so do I. But I have not yet met the man—or woman—who can combine wisdom and jealousy.

And Carstairs was madly, furiously jealous. It was like the irony of things that love should come to him now, and that the love of the woman he loved should be denied him. A fierce resentment against his fate shook him.

And apart from his passionate desire for his wife's love, he was conscious, too, of a tender longing for her presence and companionship, apart altogether from their relations as man and wife. The thought of her permeated impalpably all he did and thought.

In those last few weeks of the Old Year, surely they had been drawn very near together, he remembered sadly. In the hours in his gloomy office at the works there had always been the warm anticipation of her eager, wistful young face, her happy

child-like smile, awaiting him. And these after-dinner hours, when she used to bring her sewing to the library, and sit in mouse-like quiet or otherwise—as his mood dictated—had come to spell for him almost perfect happiness.

But now all that was changed. It was long since she had met him on his daily return from the works. It was long since she had brought her sewing to the library at nights. And yet, there had been a certain comfort in the knowledge that she was there, under his roof, within touch, within call.

But since she had gone to Crane Hall, an uncanny silence, almost like the silence of death, seemed to him to brood over the house.

Though he had said little, he had been sorely hurt by her undisguised eagerness to leave him while he was yet barely recovered from the illness consequent on his wound. Nothing, he felt, could have spoken more eloquently of her utter indifference to him.

He had wondered drearily sometimes, of late, if she meant to come back at all.

For the proposed week or ten days had lengthened into nearly three weeks, and it was already the last day of March. Also he knew that Dinwoodie was staying at Crane Hall.

He rose to get a match, and as he sat down again, the front door bell rang sharply. A thrill of ungovernable joy ran through him at the possibility that it might be Delia But a moment's reflection told him the unlikelihood of her coming at such an

hour. For it was already past ten. Then the fear that it might be a messenger to say she was ill turned him half sick. He crossed the room with uncertain steps; but before he reached the door, it was thrown open, and Dinwoodie came in.

'What is it?' Carstairs exclaimed hoarsely, without other greeting. 'What has happened? Is she —ill?'

The other looked surprised, even bewildered.

'Nothing has happened,' he said. 'Is who ill? I don't understand.'

Carstairs sat down by the table, and leaned his head on his hands. He hardly knew what he had feared.

'What on earth is the matter, Carstairs?' said Dinwoodie, looking, as he felt, all at sea. 'You look like death.'

With a violent effort Carstairs pulled himself together.

'You—startled me,' he said, trying to speak calmly. 'I thought that something had happened —at Crane Hall.'

'Nothing has happened that I know of,' answered the other somewhat moodily. 'I only biked over for a smoke and a chat. You and I don't seem to have seen much of one another of late, old chap.'

Carstairs did not answer immediately, but leaned back in his chair watching Dinwoodie fill his pipe.

Then he said:

'No, we have not had much to say to one another for some time.'

His companion paused in the act of striking a match, arrested by the note of bitter hostility in the speaker's voice.

'Look here, Donald,' he said abruptly, as he threw away the match. 'What's the matter with you of late? You ought to be the happiest fellow in the world. You've a good, sweet little wife—by Jove! she's a woman in ten thousand. And yet you look——'

'Yes,' rejoined Carstairs quietly, 'I look—not the happiest fellow in the world. And you—I can't say you look specially jubilant. What has happened to us both, do you suppose?'

There was a distinct sneer in his voice; but Dinwoodie did not seem to notice it.

'I know what's happened to me,' he said shortly.

Then, as Carstairs made no reply, he continued:

'It's a poor show, this world of ours.'

'Think so?' his host replied carelessly.

'See here, Donald,' Dinwoodie said, leaning back in his chair, and crossing his arms behind his head, 'we've been chums since we were kiddies and—I'm in the mood for confidences.'

The stony silence in which this remark was received was surely not conducive to confidence. But Dinwoodie seemed unconscious of it, or at least indifferent to it.

'I'm most infernally miserable,' he went on abruptly.

'Are you?' said Carstairs unemotionally. 'Why?'

The other was silent for a few moments. Then he said, smoking hard and furiously the while:

'As a matter of fact—I've fallen in love.'

A look of incredulous fury swept over Carstairs' face. But he only said in a voice of deadly calm:

'Yes?'

'You're deucedly unsympathetic,' said Dinwoodie, with a short laugh. 'But I don't care. I'm in the mood to talk to the man in the street, if he would listen to me. I've fallen in love, I tell you. And the woman I love won't have anything to say to me, as a lover. She offers me—friendship.'

Carstairs rose suddenly, flung aside the window-curtains, and stood for a few seconds looking out into the night.

Then he turned back into the room again. His face was deadly white, and his hands were trembling.

'And have you told her of—of your passion, then?' he said thickly.

Dinwoodie had risen too, and was leaning his back against the high mantelpiece.

'I have not told her, in so many words,' he answered briefly. 'But I think she knows. And she has given me to understand—that other ties come between.'

A red mist seemed to surge before Carstairs' eyes.

'Ah, she meant her husband, doubtless,' he

said, in a queer, unnatural voice. 'But husbands don't count for much nowadays. I dare say he is some poor fool who trusted her and trusted you —you because you were his friend, and her because she is his wife. Why take him into consideration in the matter?'

He stopped, for his voice was literally beyond his control.

Dinwoodie had removed his pipe from his mouth, and was gazing at the other in petrified amazement.

'Good God, Carstairs, what on earth is the matter with you?' he said, speaking slowly, and with long pauses between the words.

Then a wave of comprehension swept over his face.

'I see,' he said sternly. 'I understand. We both love the same woman, it seems.'

The throbbing silence that followed seemed to fill the room.

The two men glared at each other like two wild beasts. But on Dinwoodie's part, at least, the old friendship died hard.

'I had no idea,' he said very quietly, 'that you cared for her.'

Carstairs turned upon him in uncontrollable fury.

'Damn you!' he said inarticulately, 'what is it to you whether I care for her or not? Are you mad—or am I—that you should dare to come to me and tell me that you are in love with my wife,

and that though you have not told her so in so many words, she knows! God! it is inconceivable.'

'In love with your wife?' the other repeated in haughty amazement. 'Have you taken leave of your senses? Do you take me for a blackguard?'

Carstairs stood quite still for a second or so; then flinging himself into a chair by the table, he buried his head in his outstretched arms, and broke into a fit of horrible sobbing laughter.

Presently Dinwoodie touched him on the shoulder.

'Pull yourself together,' he said shortly. 'And in God's name, let us try to explain this tangle.'

Carstairs raised his head, and pushed the hair back from his forehead with a gesture of weariness.

'I misunderstood you,' he muttered, 'and misjudged you. I—I am not quite myself, these days. I have had rather a blow—and I suppose I have made rather a fool of myself. Forgive me, Alec, I might have known.'

'Yes, I think you might,' returned the other sharply. 'But to prevent further idiotic mistakes I may as well tell you that the woman I have been talking of is Berenice Edgecombe, and that the ties she speaks of are those precious sons of hers.'

Carstairs said nothing. He felt stunned and sick in a relief that was like a keen physical pain.

'Well, I'm going,' said Dinwoodie. 'I'll see you to-morrow, most likely. But at present, I'm rather raked up. Good-night.'

When Dinwoodie had gone, Carstairs went out into the clear March night, and cut across the orchards to the river.

Its placid waters seemed to calm the wild beating of his pulses.

He had misjudged his friend; and he was sorry. But his wife was no nearer to him. That Dinwoodie was indifferent to her, by no means proved that she was indifferent to Dinwoodie.

Chapter XVI

THE house-party at Crane Hall was what Minx herself would have called 'very mixed biscuits.' For besides choice members of her own particular set, there were several of her husband's cronies, and a sprinkling of nondescripts who had availed themselves of airy general invitations given some months ago—invitations which had totally escaped the memory of both Mr. and Mrs. Dunstable.

But there was room, and to spare, for all. And all, with one or two exceptions, had a rollicking good time.

Bridge, of course, with a certain section of the guests, held sway in the afternoons and half the nights, with, as a rule, more or less objectionable horseplay sandwiched in between.

Delia, however, was one of the exceptions who did not appear to have a rollicking time.

She had already repented her hasty action in leaving home 'in a temper'; and had it not been for that curious quality known alternatively as proper pride and obstinacy, she would have packed up her things and gone back before she had been at the Hall a couple of days.

Several of the men had been more or less attracted by her sweet, if somewhat sad-looking little face. But her listless manner, and painful indifference to their conversational brilliancy, caused them to leave her, after a few interchanged platitudes, with the fatal verdict of 'pretty, rather—but deadly heavy to get on with.'

On the morning after Dinwoodie's visit to Garrioch Towers, he and Delia met in one of the hothouses. And each noted the other's depression.

'Beastly morning, isn't it?' said Dinwoodie, as he absently plucked a piece of scented geranium and stuck it in his button-hole.

'Is it?' she answered listlessly. 'I haven't noticed.'

'You are not looking well, Mrs. Carstairs,' he said, in a concerned, kindly voice. 'You are far too white and too thin. I don't know what Carstairs will say when you go back. He will think we haven't been looking after you.'

At the mention of her husband's name he noticed the hard cold look that came into her pretty and usually gentle eyes. And he mentally exonerated Carstairs for all his bitter speeches of the preceding evening.

It had flashed across him, then, that Carstairs had fallen hopelessly in love with his own wife; and now he, like Carstairs himself, imagined that she had nothing but chilly indifference to the man she had married. Indeed, in her expression now,

he read more than indifference—something akin to bitter resentment.

'And yet,' he reflected, 'at one time I could have sworn that if she wasn't in love with him, she was at least very fond of him.'

Now, Alec Dinwoodie was a born peacemaker; and it grieved his honest heart sincerely that those two people for whom he had such a deep regard should have drifted so far apart. So he set about his self-appointed mission with true masculine clumsiness.

'I biked over to see Donald last night?' he said casually, watching her keenly the while.

'Did you?' she answered, a sudden wave of colour dying her small face.

'Yes,' he continued. 'I thought the dear old chap looked awfully down and out of sorts. I dare say he's lonely a bit.'

'Possibly,' assented Mrs. Carstairs, with a fine assumption of detachment from the subject in hand.

It is extraordinary, by the way, how diabolically cruel the sweetest of women can be if once they harbour the god of love and the demon of jealousy simultaneously.

Delia knew very well that her husband was bound to miss her in a thousand little ways; she knew that, thanks to the attempt on his life barely six weeks ago, he was not in his usual health. Doubtless, if he had been anybody else, she would have been full of compassion and tenderness. And

yet, because she loved him, and because she was jealous, she knowingly tortured herself, and unknowingly tortured him.

Indignant at her indifference, Dinwoodie said somewhat brutally:

'I don't think he's ever got over that last illness. I only hope these beggars at the works won't try any more games. I'm afraid they'll make sure of matters next time.'

She was not utterly hard-hearted, after all, apparently, for at his words an uncontrollable look of terror leapt into her eyes.

'But he assured me that all danger was over,' she faltered.

He shrugged his shoulders as he lit a cigarette.

'Men don't usually make much of such matters to their womenkind,' he said. 'And Carstairs is not the fellow to talk much of any risks he might run or had run. To speak plainly, Mrs. Carstairs, I think you ought to be with your husband, and, by Jove! I think he feels it.'

She turned her face away from him, and ruthlessly demolished a branch of a fragrant flowering plant.

'Mr. Dinwoodie,' she said at last, in a queer breathless voice, 'I want you to answer a question. Was my husband at one time on the point of marrying—Mrs. Edgecombe?'

He flushed darkly, and she, of course, misinterpreted his embarrassment.

'Ah, I thought so,' she cried sharply.

He caught her arm in a fierce grip that hurt her.

'You are quite wrong,' he said in a rough voice. 'I swear to you that there never was any question of anything of the kind between them—never.'

'I might have known you would not give away your friend,' she said, with a slight smile. 'But, you see, I have heard differently.'

'But why should you let idle gossip make you unhappy and unjust?' he exclaimed. 'It's deucedly hard lines on Carstairs.'

'How dare you say I am unhappy?' she flashed out, with flaming cheeks. 'I am not unhappy. I am very, very happy,' she added, her voice breaking into an undeniable sob.

'I'm glad to hear it,' he answered drily. 'All I can say is, you don't look it.'

There was a pause, during which a sprig of geranium suffered severely.

'Should you like to know who the one woman in the world is for Donald Carstairs?' he went on, taking her elbows in his hands, and making her face him. 'Should you? No? But you shall. *You* are! I'm giving him away, I know. But it's for his own good. He's madly, idiotically in love with you. And so are you with him. And if you'll pardon my saying so, you are both acting like a couple of fools.'

And so saying he went away, slamming the hothouse door behind him, and leaving her to digest his words as best she might.

But alas! Delia placed no credence in his statement as to her husband's feelings, and resented furiously his too true interpretation of her own. And for perhaps the twentieth time she read a crumpled note dated from Garrioch Towers some days back, which ran thus:

'DEAR DELIA,

'I have received your note, and am glad you are having a pleasant visit. All is going on as usual here. I fancy the weather is slightly warmer.

'With kind regards to your host and hostess,

'Sincerely yours,

'DONALD G. W. CARSTAIRS.'

A lover-like epistle, truly, she thought with a scornful curl of her lip, as she replaced the note in her pocket.

It was the repeated perusal of this effusion, penned by Carstairs in answer to one equally laconic from herself, that had helped to keep alive Delia's resentment and sense of humiliation.

'If only I did not love him,' she murmured, covering her face with her hands. 'Or if only he had asked me to marry him because he loved me—even if it had only been for a little while. Or if

only I had not told him I was willing to escape from my humdrum life on almost any terms.'

And through it all she longed intensely for the presence of this man towards whom her thoughts were so bitter, longed for those quiet days of early winter, when she had begun to think she might have a place in her husband's life.

But, after all, she reflected drearily, what attractions had she to offer in opposition to dear, sweet Berenice Edgecombe? And it is curious to note that, in all her jealous misery, she had never once blamed or thought bitterly of this new friend. Indeed, it was with a warm feeling of pleasure that she remembered that Berenice and her two sons were expected at Crane Hall that afternoon, to dine and stay over night.

In some cases this absence of enmity towards a rival might have been unnatural. But Delia knew very well that Berenice Edgecombe's heart had no room for any man's image, save that of her sons. And one does not quarrel with the moon because it governs the tides. One only recognises that the tides are inexorably governed. It seemed to Delia that if she had been a man she, too, would have fallen in love with Berenice.

Luncheon was always a wild and uproarious meal when there was a house-party at Crane Hall. But to-day it was wilder and more uproarious than ever, and both Delia and Dinwoodie—who seemed tacitly to be allotted to one another—were glad when it

was over, and the noisy company dispersed in various directions until the afternoon bridge-playing should set in.

It was a hopelessly wet afternoon, and most of the younger members of the party were indulging in romping games that gave rise to shrieks of laughter.

One of these games, known as 'Bundles,' consisted in a young man or a young woman being seated on an outspread travelling-rug (having previously drawn lots for the privilege). The rug was then seized by as many hands as there was room for, and laboriously dragged to the top of the great staircase. The inmate of the rug was subsequently securely tied therein, and set to roll down the long flight of shallow steps, until, shouting and bumping, he or she reached the floor of the hall. Sometimes two or more human 'bundles' were despatched at one and the same time. Minx was one of the ringleaders in this pastime, which continued until two bundles knocked their respective heads so smartly together that the one sobbed, and the other swore. And then for a time there was a lull.

'What a Pandemonium!' said Dinwoodie, who was seated beside Delia in one of the wide window-seats.

'Yes, isn't it?' she answered. 'It reminds me of the parrot-house at the Zoo.'

'It reminds me a good deal more of the monkey

house,' he muttered savagely. 'Let us go into the music-room, shall we? It is one of the few places where the din doesn't penetrate.'

'Very well.' Then, as they crossed the hall, she added irrelevantly: 'Berenice Edgecombe is coming this afternoon.'

'Is she?' he said, with a suppressed eagerness in his tone. 'I didn't know that. Are you sure?'

She did not answer immediately. Then she said, looking at him with penetrating understanding eyes:

'What?—you, too?'

He laughed, but his face had lost colour somewhat.

'My dear Mrs. Carstairs, you are cryptic,' he replied in an odd voice.

'You needn't prevaricate,' she said slowly. 'I am not surprised. I don't blame you. I don't blame anyone. And I blame her least of all.'

This time he made no pretence of not understanding her.

'You are a very foolish little girl,' he said gently. 'And you are deliberatively shutting the door on your own happiness.'

Berenice and Delia had not met for some time, and before going to bed that night they sat before the fire in the latter's room, and talked in the intervals of hair-brushing, as women will.

'You look a very subdued and not at all cheerful little person,' said Berenice, as she laid her hand affectionately on the other's arm. 'What is it,

dear? And how is Donald? And how has he come to give leave of absence to so recent a bride?'

'Donald is at Garrioch,' Delia answered. 'He is very well, I believe. And he seemed very willing to give me leave of absence. I am not an absolutely necessary adjunct to his existence.'

Berenice looked at her wistfully. Then she kissed her.

'Delia,' she whispered hesitatingly—'you and Donald haven't quarrelled, have you?'

'Oh no,' was the bitter answer. 'Donald does not care enough about me to quarrel with me.'

'Ah, my dear,' the other answered earnestly. 'You don't know Donald as I do. He is not demonstrative, and he is not given to talk of his feelings. But he loves you dearly, I am sure, or he would never have married you.'

Delia sat silent, a queer little smile playing round her lips.

Then she said briefly:

'You don't understand, dear Berenice. And I—can't tell you.'

The other made no answer, and presently Delia broke out passionately:

'Oh, it is a dreary miserable world, and I hate it. It is so different from what I expected it to be, in the old days when I lived with the aunts. I wish I had never left them. And yet I used to think I would give anything to escape from it.'

'Poor little girl!' murmured Berenice softly.

'Poor little girl! Do you remember what dear old Thomas à Kempis says: "*The cross, therefore, is always ready, and everywhere waits for thee. Thou canst not escape it whithersoever thou runnest; for wheresoever thou goest thou carriest thyself with thee, and shall ever find thyself.*"'

In answer Delia squeezed the speaker's hand in silence.

Then, after a pause, she said:

'You dear Berenice! No wonder every man loves you who sees you.'

The other coloured brightly; then she laughed a little.

'You funny child! Except my own boys, I only know one man who loves me—at least, I think he does—yes, I think he does,' she added dreamily.

Delia started to her feet with a half-suppressed cry.

'What is it, dear?' asked Berenice, looking startled.

'Nothing,' was the half-hysterical answer. 'My—my foot had gone to sleep.'

'Well, we had better follow its example,' laughed Berenice.

Next morning brought a brief note from Carstairs summoning Delia home. Nan was laid up with a slight attack of inflammation of the lungs, and fretted for the presence of her stepmother.

Delia set off in remorseful haste.

When she reached Overbridge (the station for

Garrioch) it was raining heavily ; but almost before the train stopped she recognised her husband's tall figure on the platform.

Their greeting was cold and constrained, and during the drive to the house they barely exchanged two dozen words.

Nan was pathetically glad to welcome her 'Mumsey,' and within the next few days began to mend rapidly.

'I wanted you so, Mumsey,' she whispered. 'I know it was selfish ; but I *made* father send for you.'

Delia took the child lovingly in her arms and kissed her.

In her heart she was glad to be at home again. Whether her husband loved her or not, she told herself, her place was here. Her place and her rightful home.

On the second evening after her return Dinwoodie came over to inquire for the little invalid. Delia greeted him with frank pleasure. Even Carstairs' jealous fancy could not misinterpret the heart-whole smile in her eyes. Had he been a suspicious imaginative fool, he asked himself savagely ?

When Delia had gone back to Nan, the two men betook themselves to the library, and when their pipes were well under way Dinwoodie said awkwardly enough :

'We have been friends for a good many years now, Donald, and I suppose may say things to one

another that one would resent from anyone else.'

Carstairs was silent, and the other went on:

'We nearly came to loggerheads the other night over an infernally silly mistake—but it opened my eyes to the fact that——'

He stopped, and then continued hurriedly:

'You'll forgive me, I hope, old chap, if I tell you that—oh, hang it all, I can't beat about the bush! —but what I want to say is that I can't help seeing you're most awfully gone on that sweet little wife of yours, and that you've taken up the idea that she doesn't care for you.'

Carstairs altered his position slightly, and struck a match with deliberate care.

'Well,' he said quietly, 'and if I am, and if I have—what then?'

'Your tone implies that it is none of my business,' returned Dinwoodie, gazing steadfastly at the fire. 'And, strictly speaking, I suppose it isn't. But, as you know, I'm not in the seventh heaven of happiness myself. So I have a pretty fair idea how it cuts. And I should like to help to put things straight a bit for you, if I can. What I want to say to you is that I think your wife cares for you just about as much as you do for her. But she has been hearing a lot of gossip about you and—and Mrs. Edgecombe. And the poor little soul is wild with jealousy.'

'Pooh, nonsense,' was the curt answer.

'Well, well, there's none so blind as those, etc., etc. So I'd better leave you to be miserable in your own way.'

'What reason have you for supposing she is—jealous?' said Carstairs, after a pause.

His tone was unwilling and ungracious. But Dinwoodie affected not to notice this.

'I don't suppose you're in a mood to think any reason adequate,' he said carelessly. 'But—I think I know something of women. And I have good reasons for what I say. If she's not in love with you, she's next door to it. And if you took a little pains, you could easily win her love.'

'At my age one is not an adept at winning love,' was the moody answer.

'Oh, rubbish. If you are not too old to be in love, you are not too old to take some trouble about it,' said the other brusquely. 'You are her husband. Why don't you make her love you?'

Carstairs laughed, and his laugh sounded dreary.

'I dare say. Why don't you try your own prescription?' he said. 'Bah! Who can understand women? Help yourself to whisky, and pass along the soda.'

Chapter XVII

It was a fortnight later, and April, coquetting with spring, was pretending that she was June.

Nan was quite herself again, except that she was to be immune from lessons for the next week or two. Thus Lulu wrestled alone with Miss Bumpus.

'Oh, doodness!' wept this small and most unwilling scholar to Delia one sunny afternoon. 'Oh, doodness! don't want to do lessons all alone without Nan. Can't bear Bumpus. Would rather have old Torpey. Oh, doodness, feel as if doin' to have 'flation of lungs, like Nan, quite soon.'

'Oh, but I wouldn't be a silly little cry-baby,' remonstrated Delia. 'You must learn lessons, you know, or you'll grow up to be a dunce.'

'What's a dunce?' inquired Lulu, drying her eyes with her pinafore.

'Dunces are people who—who don't know things they ought to know,' answered her stepmother, somewhat vaguely.

'Are you one?' asked Lulu in a more hopeful tone.

'No, I don't think so, dear.'

'Do you know nine times?' went on Lulu rapidly. 'Do you know what nine times seventeen is?—quite quick, in your head?'

'Oh, well,' began Delia, beginning to calculate uncertainly——

'No, no,' crowed the little one gleefully. 'Bumpus doesn't let you do it on your fingers. Mumsey, Mumsey, dear wee Mumsey, you're a dunce, too. You and me both dunces, and don't care a button for old Bumpus.'

And she danced delightedly away.

Delia went up to her room to get ready to walk down to Teviot Cottage, for old Miss Wedgwood had sent a note to say she was in bed with a slight heart attack, and would be glad if Delia would go to sit with her for a little. She had taken a violent fancy to Carstairs' young wife, and had actually been to call upon her twice since Christmas. And Delia frequently went to spend an hour with her, by express invitation.

To-day she found her sitting up in bed, wrapped in a pale-blue shawl, and with one of her beloved volumes propped up before her. She looked a curiously weird and yet pathetic figure, in the great four-posted bed, with its dimity hangings. Her deep-set dark eyes glittered under her heavy brows, and her iron-grey hair hung in tight natural curls round her pallid shrunken little face.

'It is good of you to come, my dear,' she said, holding out a tiny claw-like hand. 'You are always

kind and good. Sit there and talk to me for a little. Somehow—I don't know if it is because I am stupid because of not feeling well, but I fancy this volume is not quite—not *quite* so amusing as some of the others.'

'Perhaps you should lay it aside, and read something else for a change,' suggested Delia gently.

'Oh no, my dear; I couldn't possibly do that,' was the agitated answer. 'What if I should be taken away suddenly, and had not finished them? It would be most unfortunate.'

'Shall I read to you a little?' asked the girl, as she took off her gloves and scarf.

'No, no, dear; thank you. I dare say I am not in the mood, perhaps, to appreciate what I have been reading. Now, this joke, for instance,' she went on, turning back a page or two. 'I can't see that it is funny. Can you?'

She watched her visitor's face anxiously as the latter carefully read the passage indicated.

'No, it isn't funny at all, to me,' Delia said decidedly. 'But I dare say it is a topical joke, which might be funny to those who knew the context. You see, it was nearly fifty years ago.'

'Ah, yes, yes; that is very likely,' was the relieved answer. 'Very, very likely. You have lifted quite a weight from my mind. I really was afraid my sense of humour might be becoming blunted. And I have heard that that is one of the signs of mental decay. You are looking very nice to-day, my dear.

And that is a very pretty scarf you have just taken off. I remember once having one almost exactly like it—or was it my mother? I forget. And how is Donald?'

'He is quite well,' the girl answered. 'He is at the works, as usual.'

'He is a very fine man, Donald,' the old lady murmured. 'A very fine man. You ought to be a very happy young woman, my dear.'

'Yes,' answered Delia. Then in a different tone she added:

'I always think this is such a pretty, quaint room. And it always smells of rose-leaves and lavender. It is like a room in a story.'

'Yes, I am very comfortable in this little cottage,' said the other contentedly. 'I bought it just as it stands, furniture and all, as I think I told you. I believe the furniture is very valuable and old. Sometimes when I lie awake in the night I count over all my mercies, and think I ought to be very thankful. And I pretend to myself that I was born in this house, and that all my childhood and girlhood were passed here, and that every room, and every nook in the garden, has some dear sacred memory.'

Delia did not answer, and the old lady went on, as if half to herself:

'And that dream-lover of whom I told you, used to come in by that little wicket-gate that opens on the meadow, and we used to sit and talk in the

window-seat in the parlour. And I seem to remember that it was there he told me that I was beautiful, and that he loved me. And at that old bureau, yonder, near the window, I seem to have written him many letters, and it pleases me to fancy that he answered them in the language that men use to beautiful women whom they love. And I remember —or pretend that I remember—that it was under the apple-tree by the orchard gate (there is a rustic seat there, you know) that I read the letter that told me he was dead. Well, well, I am a foolish old woman, I suppose. But these shadowy fancies seem to make up to me for the things in life that come to most women—and that I have missed. Take away the book, my dear,' she added with a little sigh. 'I am weary. I think I could sleep. But I shall not sleep long. I never do. I wonder if you would hold my hand until I wake ?'

'Yes, dear Miss Wedgwood, of course I will,' the girl answered softly.

'And will you repeat to me "The Land beyond the Sea"?' went on the sweet, quavering old voice. 'You speak it so prettily, and your voice is so soothing.'

And with the other's hand in hers Delia repeated obediently :

'"The Land beyond the sea !
Sometimes distinct and near,
It grows upon the eye and ear,
And the gulf narrows to a threadlike mere ;
We seem half-way to thee,
Calm land beyond the sea !

'"The Land beyond the sea!
Oh, how the lapsing years,
'Mid our not unsubmissive tears,
Have borne, now singly, now in fleets, the biers
Of those we love to thee,
Calm Land beyond the sea!

'"Oh, Land beyond the sea!
Why fadest thou in light?
Why art thou better seen towards night?
Dear Land, look always near, look always bright,
Calm Land beyond the sea!"'

'Thanks, my dear,' said Miss Wedgwood, pressing the hand she held, as the girl's voice ceased. 'It is very sweet. I shall try to sleep now.'

But she did not sleep. And when Delia looked at her she saw that she was crying quietly.

'Dear Miss Wedgwood, what is it?' she asked in some concern. 'Are you in pain?'

'No, no, my dear, it is nothing. Only sometimes I wonder—I wonder—if I have wasted all these years——'

Her voice died away, and with a brief sigh she turned her head away and slept.

Delia leaned back in the old-fashioned, spindle-legged chair, still holding the wrinkled yellow hand in hers. The breeze stole in at the open window and stirred the spotless dimity curtains. The April sunshine danced on the faded wall-paper, and brightened up the dingy old prints that hung over the mantelpiece. One was of a stern-looking young man in naval uniform. It was half-hidden by a

wreath of freshly-cut laurel leaves. Delia wondered drowsily if it represented Miss Wedgwood's mental picture of her shadowy dream-lover. And, as she wondered, she too fell asleep.

And in her sleep she dreamed that she sat at the old-fashioned little bureau writing wild pathetic letters to her husband; and that, as she wrote, a hand was laid on her shoulder, and looking up, she saw the man of the engraving with the laurel wreath. He took her hand, and his fingers were icy cold. And still in her dream, she heard herself cry out:

'You are real, then?—you are not a shadow?'

Then she awoke with a start, and looked up into the face of her husband.

The room was in darkness, save for the candle Carstairs held; and at first she thought that she must still be dreaming.

'Donald!' she whispered, as she sprang unsteadily to her feet—'Donald!—*is* it you?'

'Yes, dear,' he answered, in a voice she had not heard from him since their estrangement. 'Come away, child. Come.'

'How did you know I was here?' she said, passing her hand confusedly over her forehead.

'Nan told me where you had gone,' he replied, 'and when it grew late and you had not returned, I got anxious, and came to look for you.'

As he spoke he tried to draw her gently away.

'But,' she said under her breath, as she glanced

at the bed, 'I promised I would stay with her until she woke.'

He put his arm round her.

'Dear, she will never wake,' he answered in a low moved voice. 'She is dead.'

He took her down to the quiet parlour, where the rose-shaded lamp already shone through the semi-darkness, and went to the door to meet the hastily-summoned doctor, who had just come.

She heard them go upstairs together, and the sound of their footsteps in the room above.

The lamplight shone dimly on the china and the pictures, and the row of queer old miniatures on either side of the low, old-fashioned mantel-mirror; and on the dwarf bookcases, filled with all the volumes of *Punch*. There was a gap in one of the shelves. That belonged to the volume in the room upstairs. A pale streak of moonlight crept in by the window overlooking the garden, and lay across the window-seat where Miss Wedgwood's dream-lover had wooed her. It crept further, and touched the keys of the rickety spinet, which always stood open, with pieces of old-world music on its rack.

To Delia it all seemed inexpressibly sad. She broke into subdued crying, and buried her head in the cushions of the window-seat, to shut out the loud solemn ticking of the tall, eight-day clock in the hall.

A little later Carstairs came to her, and seating

himself beside her, he held her closely to him until her sobs were stilled.

'Don't cry,' he whispered soothingly. 'Don't cry, there's a good girl. The poor old soul is at rest, and Ferrole says she couldn't have suffered—just passed away in her sleep.'

He took her home and made her lie down on the sofa in the library, where he ordered a dainty little supper to be brought for her. And they were drawn nearer to one another than they had been for many a long day.

Chapter XVIII

About a fortnight after Miss Wedgwood's death, Dinwoodie had gone to spend an hour in the twilight at Rowan Cottage, as he often did. He had left Crane Hall, and was staying at the tiny inn at Garrioch village, ostensibly for trout-fishing. This evening it was wet and chilly. But in Berenice's cosy sitting-room a cheery fire was blazing, and the air was sweet with the scent of spring flowers.

Berenice herself was sitting on a low chair near the hearth. Dinwoodie was walking up and down the room.

Presently she said hesitatingly :

'Alec—I have something to say to you. And—I don't quite know how to say it !'

Without speaking, he drew a chair near to hers, and sat down.

'Well ?' he said, when a minute had passed in silence.

'I have known you for a good many years,' she began in a low voice. 'And we have always been true close friends. Have we not ?'

'Yes,' he answered briefly.

'But now, Alec——'

She paused, and clasped her hands round her knees, while her forehead wrinkled itself into a perplexed frown.

'Yes?' he said again, interrogatively this time. 'But now—what? Is your friendship waning? If that is what you have to say to me, I warn you I shall take it badly.'

She shook her head.

'No, Alec, it isn't that.'

'What is it, then?'

Her clear dark eyes met his steadily, yet wistfully.

'Dear faithful old friend,' she said—'it is not that I care for you less. But that I think—you care for me—too much.'

There was a silence, in which the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece sounded abnormally loud.

'Well?' said Dinwoodie harshly, at last. 'And if I do, what then? Does it do you any harm? I have kept it to myself. I know well enough—have always known—how much chance I have.'

'It—grieves me,' she said, her lips trembling a little. 'Your friendship has been so dear to me—so very, very dear.'

He caught her hands in his.

'Berenice,' he said indistinctly, 'can it never be anything dearer? Or is it—no use?'

She met his eyes with such frank sadness that his heart sank in the knowledge of her answer.

'It is no use, dear Alec,' she whispered. 'I shall never marry again. My life belongs to my boys, as theirs does to me.'

He dropped her hands, and rose to his feet. She rose too.

'Alec—I am so grieved—so distressed,' she faltered.

He nodded dumbly, and put up his hand as though to check her further speech.

Again silence hung over the room, and the clock's ticking seemed to become more insistent.

Presently Dinwoodie pulled himself together with a violent effort, and said in a voice strangely unlike his own:

'Then I won't bother you any more. But, Berenice, there must be an end to our friendship. I can't stand it. Either you must be everything to me—or nothing.'

She uttered a dismayed little cry.

'Ah no, Alec, not that. I shall miss you so cruelly. You are such a comfort to me.'

'I dare say,' he answered grimly. 'That is so like a woman. My torture is to count for nothing, because my friendship is a comfort to you.'

'I wish I had held my tongue,' she said in a sorrowful little voice. 'But I thought it was only fair to—to——'

'My dear, you were quite right,' he said, leaning his elbow on the mantelpiece, and covering his eyes with his hand. 'It was better that I should know,

once for all, that I must put you out of my life for ever.'

She laid her hand hesitatingly on his arm.

'Ah, but I don't want to be put out of your life,' she said, in the tender caressing voice that so often wrung his heart. 'Couldn't we go back to the old happy friendship?'

'No,' he answered sternly, as he straightened himself, and looked down at her with loving, miserable eyes. 'Shall I tell you why? Because it has never been friendship with me. From the first day I saw you, long ago, a small white-faced thing in your heavy widow's clothes—with not a thought on earth but for those two boys—I loved you. You are a mother all through, Berenice—as yet. You have never known the passion of love for any man. But you shall know it one day. And I shall teach it to you. I shall wait patiently; but the day will come—sooner or later. But while I wait, we shall not see each other.'

She put one foot on the fender, and looked down sorrowfully into the fire.

'All those years?' she said, with a catch in her sweet voice. 'Have you really loved me all those years? And I never knew—until a few months ago.'

'No. And if you had not spoken of it to-night, you never should have known—from me, lest it should mean, what it means now, the loss of our friendship. And yet, perhaps I am lying. Perhaps

I should have told you. I have been on the verge of it often, God knows. And now, Berenice, I am going to say good-bye. If ever you are in great trouble, if ever these precious boys of yours fail you—no, don't look like a little tigress; such things happen sometimes—send for me, and I will come. But until then, we shall not see one another.'

'But,' she said pleadingly, 'you will at least write to me?'

'No,' he answered steadily, 'I shall not write to you. And you need not write to me, for I shall not answer your letters. Unless, as I have told you, you are in great trouble. Then I shall answer that letter in person—if I am alive.'

'Oh, Alec, you are cruel!' she murmured.

'No,' was the quick answer, 'it is you who are cruel. You who, secure in your calm friendship for me, care nothing that——'

He lost control of his voice just then, and dug his hands savagely into the pockets of his jacket as he walked over to the fast-darkening window.

'I shall be so lonely without you,' she said, a half-sob in her voice.

'Oh no, you won't,' he answered bitterly. 'You will have your sons. May they never disappoint you!'

She shook her head with a dreamy tender smile that maddened him.

'Well, I am going,' he said, coming over to where

she still stood by the fire. 'So good-bye, dear cruel little woman.'

As he spoke he took her suddenly in his arms, and kissed her forehead.

'That,' he whispered, 'for our many years' friendship. And this'—and his lips pressed her cheek—'for the reverent love that has always been in my heart for you.'

He paused a moment, and then passionately kissed her lips.

'And this, my one woman in the world,' he said hoarsely, 'for the love that is going to be ours one day, please God.'

He released her almost roughly, and before she quite realised that he was going, he had gone.

She stood quite still where he had left her.

His first two kisses had not moved her. But the touch of his lips on hers had stirred some strange unplumbed depths in her heart. Her pulses were beating violently; her cheeks were burning. She sat down on the sofa, and covered her face with her hands.

It was not to be believed that he had gone away for always. She could hardly imagine her life now without Alec Dinwoodie. She had always taken his friendship, his letters, his thoughtfully chosen gifts, his frequent visits, as matters of course; and had been no more grateful for them than for the air she breathed, or for her daily meals. It seemed

impossible, unnatural, that he should go out of her life for ever.

She took her hands from her face, and looked round the firelit room. It was full of memories and associations of their friendship. There was a chair he always called his chair. There were countless dainty trifles that he had given her from time to time. There were books in which he had written her name.

There was no photograph of him, though. He had always refused to give her his photograph, because he said he did not choose to share her attention with the hundred and one photographs of her sons that crowded every available space where photographs could be. George and Ronald in airy and insufficient infant attire; George and Ronald in short frocks—in sailor suits—in Eton jackets—in boating flannels—in knickerbockers. George and Ronald in profile; George and Ronald three-quarters face; George and Ronald looking squarely in front of them. And so on *ad infinitum*. Dinwoodie was sick of them all.

Berenice looked round her, and shivered. A dreariness seemed to have fallen upon the room. Something had gone out of her life, and she knew it.

And for the first time in their respective twenty-one and twenty years, her sons shared her mental horizon with someone else.

George came in a little later, handsome and debonair, as usual.

'What—all in the dark, Motherkin!' he cried, in his fresh boyish voice. 'And what, what?—Motherkin in a fit of the blues? What is it, then?'

And he put his strong young arms round her in a loving, bearish hug.

'Nothing, dear lad, nothing,' she answered hurriedly.

'Dinwoodie been here?' went on her son, glancing at the ash-tray full of cigarette-ends.

'Yes.'

'Been saying anything to vex Motherkin?' the young fellow continued sharply.

'No, dear. At least—in a way, yes. He has gone away—gone back to town.'

'Oh, is that all? He'll turn up again soon, I suppose? He doesn't usually give us time to long for his return.'

There was a tiny shade of coldness in 'Motherkin's' voice as she answered:

'He is not coming back again.'

George whistled.

'Not?' he repeated. 'By Jove! Have you quarrelled?'

'No.'

'Has he'—and the speaker's voice held a note of jealousy—'has he been making love to you?'

'Certainly not,' was the somewhat too emphatic answer.

'Humph! Well, of course, you know the fellow is in love with you,' George went on, industriously

piling coal on the fire as he spoke. 'Ronald and I have seen it for ever so long. And I can tell you we had made up our minds that if you married him we would cut it to Uncle Bill in Australia.'

'George!' exclaimed the little woman in a burst of indignant amazement. 'Is it likely that I should want to marry anyone?'

'I hope not,' said Master George, taking up a position with his back to the fireplace, and assuming the lofty tone of a senior who admonishes an erring junior. 'But as Minx—I mean, as Mrs. Dunstable—was saying only to-day, he is here a jolly lot, and takes a good deal upon himself where you are concerned. You don't want any more looking after than Ronald and I can give you. And we rather resent anyone else trying it on. And Mrs. Dunstable says we are quite right.'

'I don't quite see what Mrs. Dunstable has to do with it,' said Motherkin quickly. 'You and Ronald seem to have struck up a violent friendship with her of late. You seem to be there morning, noon, and night.'

'Well, you were so taken up with Dinwoodie,' was the sullen answer.

'Pray, did she give you that rather dyspeptic-looking rose you have in your button-hole?' his mother inquired in a voice in which a sneer and a sob struggled for the mastery.

Now, as it happened, Minx—who could no more help flirting than a snake can help wriggling—had

given him the flower in question ; and had, besides, by a few well-chosen smiles, glances, and words, completely turned the young man's head. A process young men's heads were prone to, where Minx was concerned.

Her visitors had all gone, and 'Peter' had run up to town a few days ago ; therefore time was hanging rather heavily on her hands just at present. So the devotion of George and Ronald formed an amusing interlude.

Consequently, George blushed furiously at his mother's jibing little speech, and like most people in the circumstances, was savage with himself because he had blushed, and inclined to quarrel with the spectator thereof.

'Did she ?' repeated his mother with a faintly mocking smile.

'Yes, she did,' George answered defiantly. 'I really don't see, Motherkin, why you are always so down on that poor little woman, of late. I should have thought you would have been sorry for her, and taken her part, married, as she is, to a fellow in no way worthy of her.'

'I am not in the least down on her,' said Motherkin, who had by this time quite lost her temper, though she spoke calmly. 'I only think she is a very fast, vulgar, underbred young woman. As for her husband, he seems to me to be far too good for her.'

'You are angry, Motherkin, and therefore you are

unjust,' said her tall son, looking down at her with handsome, disapproving eyes.

'I am not angry, and I am not unjust,' she flashed out.

'Then you are jealous,' said the young man quietly.

At this moment the door opened, and a servant entered with a note.

Berenice opened it quickly, and having read its contents, drew down her brows in amazed displeasure.

'It is from Ronald,' she said in a queer, suppressed voice. 'It is sent from Crane Hall.'

George almost snatched it out of her hand.

'DEAREST MOTHERKIN (it ran),
'Am dining here. Shall not be late.
'Your loving son,
'RONALD.'

George drew a long breath.

'Well, of all the cheeky young pups!' he said between his teeth.

For a moment there was a dead silence. Then George rang the bell violently.

'Who brought this?' he asked as the servant reappeared.

'A boy on a bicycle, sir,' was the answer.

When the door had closed again George began to walk up and down the room in uncontrollable excitement.

'Evidently Mrs. Dunstable has enlisted your brother as champion also,' said Motherkin, with a hysterical laugh. 'Perhaps she will give him a flower.'

The young man turned to her with a look in his eyes she had never seen there before, and that cut her to the heart. Then with a few muttered words he flung himself out of the room, slamming the door violently behind him.

Motherkin stood in a kind of dumb dismay. It was the first time one of her boys had left her in anger.

A wild insane jealousy of Minx took possession of her. Her tiny frame shook with fury; her great dark eyes shone like smouldering fires under her lashes; her hands opened and shut convulsively. She felt as though she could willingly strangle the woman who had come between her boys and her.

Poor little tigress of a mother—savage and sore because her cubs had strayed beyond her ken at last. Foolish, innocent, unworldly little mother, not to know that she could not always be the one woman in the world for her idols. Surely, instead of condemning her, one should be sorry for her.

George appeared at dinner-time, pale, and with an unwonted sternness about his young lips.

He came up to Motherkin, and took her hand.

'I beg your pardon, mother,' he said quietly and coldly. 'I spoke to you as I ought not to have done. I beg your pardon.'

It was the first time he had ever addressed her as 'mother.' It had always been 'Motherkin' hitherto.

She could not have told him how the want of the diminutive hurt her.

She did not answer; for she could not have controlled her voice, but silently led the way to the dining-room.

It was a mere pretence of a meal for both; and both were glad when it was over.

Berenice wandered aimlessly about her pretty, home-like sitting-room for what seemed to her a long, weary time, and finally came to an anchor at the end window, which looked out upon the peaceful, moonlit garden. Her placid, happy world seemed to have fallen, without warning, about her ears. She was no longer the centre of her little universe. In one short day she had lost her dearest friend, and her sons had shown her that they could do without her. So she told herself; and of course exaggerated matters, as loving women are apt to do.

She turned towards the fire, and sat down in the corner of the sofa, where she had sat so many nights out of all those years, while her sons did her homage. And now she was thrust aside, counted as nothing, for the sake of a light, brainless, married woman. She would not have minded so much, she assured herself, if it had been a girl—a girl that either of her sons had fallen in love with and wanted to marry. But in the bottom of her heart she knew that that

was not true. She knew that she would have hated any girl who had come between her and either of her sons.

How selfish, you say. How unreasonable. Yes, perhaps. But human nature, stripped of its veneer, and of conventions, is apt to be selfish and unreasonable; and at times something more reprehensible still.

At last the door of the room opened, and George came in. But she did not turn her head, pretending to be absorbed in a book she had snatched up at random.

The boy—for he was little more—roamed restlessly round the room, lifted first one ornament and then another, took up books and magazines only to fling them down again; finally went to the piano, and struck a few disconnected chords.

But after a minute or two he rose, came over to the fire, and stirred it noisily.

Still Motherkin did not lift her eyes from her book.

'Motherkin!' he said at last in a low voice.

But she made no sign.

With an impatient gesture he caught the book away from her, and pitched it across the room.

'Motherkin!' he said, his voice somewhat choked, as he knelt beside her, and took her resisting little figure in his arms. 'Sweetest, dearest of Motherkins—forgive me! I have been a brute. Do forgive me!'

She held out a moment or two longer, then with a stifled little cry, she hid her face on his shoulder, and their tears mingled together.

'*Say* you don't care for her!' sobbed the little tigress, as her son remorsefully dried her tears with his handkerchief. 'Say you don't—or you will break my heart.'

'Motherkin,' he answered quietly. 'I can't say that. Because—I do.'

'But George—she is married. It is dreadful. It isn't possible,' she exclaimed passionately. 'And Ronald too. Is she to take both my boys from me?'

'Motherkin, we are not going to speak of it,' he said determinedly. 'There is nothing for you to be jealous about. No one will ever take your place in my heart. I don't know anything about Ronald. I can only speak for myself. You are my own wee Motherkin, and I shall always love you just the same as I have always done. The other is a different kind of thing altogether. Don't worry, dear. Don't cut up rough for nothing, like other fellows' mothers. You've always been more like a dear pretty little sister than a mother—just a jolly wee chum. Don't get different now, Motherkin. You won't, will you?'

As he spoke he kissed her, and clumsily stroked the dark waves of her hair. And he thought he had calmed her fears, and brought her to her normal state of mind again. He talked to her feverishly

and incoherently, now on one subject, now on another; and did not notice that her replies were brief, and not always to the point.

'There's my own little Motherkin again,' he said fondly, stroking her face with his sunburnt young hand. 'Great Scot! we came near having a quarrel, didn't we?'

She smiled faintly, but did not speak.

The young fellow rose to his feet, and said in a would-be cheerful tone:

'I think I'll go out for a turn, Motherkin. I shan't be long. I'll be back within an hour.'

'Very well,' she answered without looking at him.

When he had gone, she ran up to her room, put on a dark hat and cloak, and went out.

Chapter XIX

On this same April evening, Delia, having seen Nan and Lulu cosily tucked up in bed, went down to the drawing-room.

Under her rule, this formerly gloomy room had undergone a wonderful change. The quaint old-fashioned furniture, the sombre pictures, the faded hangings, were all there; but they were differently arranged. Big comfortable cushions heaped the couches, books and magazines lay in cheerful confusion on one or two of the tables, flowers were everywhere. A cosy fire breathed softly, and through the yet uncurtained French windows, the moon's rays struggled lazily with the pale rose-colour of the lamplight. The piano was open, and little heaps of music lay on its polished top.

Delia was no musician, as we know; but she had rather a sweet little voice, and managed to put a good deal of expression into the few simple songs she sometimes sang for her own pleasure and Nan's. Her husband was not even aware that she could sing at all.

She sat down at the piano, and touched one or

two chords lightly. They were minor chords; for her heart was in a minor key in those days. She and her husband seemed to have drifted away again from the brief break that Miss Wedgwood's death had caused in their estrangement. And though the household—with the exception, perhaps, of shrewd little Nan—saw nothing unusual in their bearing to one another, husband and wife knew that a barrier had steadily risen between them, a barrier that was daily becoming higher and more impassable.

Delia looked a lovable enough little figure as she sat there in the mingled lamplight and moonlight. She wore a filmy gown of some amber-coloured stuff, that showed her fair neck and arms. Her hair was piled up in a shining knot on the top of her head, and her eyes were wistful, like the eyes of a lost child.

Presently she began to sing, a crooning, haunting thing, that the aunts had loved in the days that now seemed so sadly far away. And the words she sang were these:

'God does not give us new flowers every year—
When the spring winds blow o'er the pleasant places,
The same dear things lift up the same fair faces—
The violet is here!

'It all comes back—the odour, grace, and hue—
Each sweet relation of its life repeated;
No blank is left, no longing-for is cheated,
It is the thing we knew.

'So, after death—the winter must it be—
God will not set strange signs in heavenly places,
The old love will look out from the old faces—
My own! I shall have thee!'

As the last notes died away, a shadow darkened one of the windows, and Carstairs came in.

She rose quickly, and her hands fell on the keys with a little crash.

'Go on, child,' he said, as he seated himself on a couch near the fire. 'Don't stop because I have come.'

But she could not sing with him for audience, and she came slowly forward into the room, a tall childish shape in the dim light, and not without a certain dignity.

He felt his heart go out to her, and a sudden impulse moved him to bridge over the gulf between them.

'Delia,' he said in a low voice, holding out his hand to her as she passed him.

She stopped, and he drew her down beside him on the couch.

'Do you know you have a very sweet little voice?' he went on. 'Why don't you sing oftener?'

His praise was very dear to her; but being a foolish little woman, she found no words to answer him.

He still held her hand, and was watching her face with a curious intentness.

He had said good-bye to Dinwoodie that evening. The latter had gone to him at the works, before catching the 6.30 express for Euston. Carstairs had not been sorry to know that he was going.

And yet—Dinwoodie and he had been close friends since their boyhood.

'Dinwoodie has gone back to town,' he said suddenly, his eyes still bent on her half-averted profile.

'Has he?' she answered, turning her clear eyes momentarily on his. 'I am sorry. I like him so much. I thought he was going to stay in Garrioch for some weeks yet.'

Carstairs drew a long deep breath.

There was no feigning in her manner, he could swear. Dinwoodie's coming or going was plainly a matter of comparative indifference to her.

'He is a good fellow,' he said, somewhat remorsefully—'an awfully good fellow.'

'Yes,' she answered abstractedly. 'We have got to know each other quite well lately. He is very, very fond of you, I think.'

Not the faintest flush touched her cheeks; not the slightest quiver crept into her voice.

Ah, surely he had been a jealous fool, after all. Why should he not set himself to win her love, even now?

An ungovernable desire took possession of him to take her in his arms, to cover her small face with kisses, to put an end to their wretched estrangement, once and for all.

'Delia,' he whispered somewhat unsteadily, 'Delia, my little wife!'

As he spoke his arms closed round her, and he bent his head until his lips touched her neck.

Suddenly a step sounded on the veranda outside; the window was flung backwards, and Berenice came into the room.

Carstairs had risen, and she went hurriedly up to him, and laid both her hands on his arm. She did not speak to Delia. Indeed, she hardly seemed to see her.

'Donald, Donald,' she said brokenly, 'I am in great trouble. Can I speak to you? Can I speak to you alone?'

She was as white as death, and her great dark eyes gleamed out of her pallid face with a strange unearthly light.

'Good God, Berenice! what has happened?' he said in a low shocked voice.

She began to sob tearlessly.

'I want you to help me,' she moaned, wringing her hands like one distracted. 'I want you to help me. I had no one else to go to. Alec has gone—I don't know where—and there is no one.'

Delia crossed the room in silence and went out. Berenice did not seem to notice her departure.

'My boys!' she said in a choked voice. 'My boys!'

'But what is it? Are they ill? Are they *dead?*' he said sharply.

She sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands.

'Oh, Donald—God has punished me for making idols of them. They have both—*both*, I tell you,

not even one, but *both*—fallen in love with that horrible woman at Crane Hall.'

Carstairs looked half-bewildered, half-irritated.

'Do you mean Mrs. Dunstable?' he asked.

'Oh yes, I mean her,' she wailed. 'Who else? They are there constantly. Ronald is there now. And, to-night, George told me—actually told me—that *he* cared for her.'

Carstairs suppressed an involuntary smile.

'My dear Berenice,' he said remonstrantly, 'I think you are rather making a mountain of a mole-hill. Young men will have those fancies. I remember, once, myself, at the mature age of eighteen, having a violent passion for a pretty matron of at least thirty. You must remember your sons are no longer children. You can't keep them in leading-strings all their lives.'

'Oh, how *can* you joke about it?' she exclaimed indignantly, 'when you see I am so miserable.'

'I am not joking,' he answered in a quiet voice. 'But you are working yourself into a fever for nothing. Let them make love to the little Dunstable. She will soon get tired of them. And it will be an experience that will do them no harm. Lads are bound to have a first passion at one time or other, and it usually comes to nothing. Let us be thankful they have not fallen victims to a barmaid, or a ballet-girl, or something worse.'

'A barmaid! A ballet-girl!' she repeated in-

dignantly. 'You forget that you are speaking of my sons.'

'My dear Berenice, all our sons are pretty much the same in given circumstances,' he said drily. 'Let the lads have their heads a bit. They will come to their senses by-and-by, if you let them alone.'

'But I am so afraid they quarrel,' she said with a catch in her voice. 'George is simply wild about her. And even to me, to-night, he spoke as he never spoke before. Things can never be the same again—never.'

'Nonsense,' he answered lightly. 'Why, what a foolish and absurd little mother you are!'

'But what would you advise me to do?' she said, beginning to walk excitedly up and down the room.

'I should advise you to do simply nothing. Be as charming and sympathetic to the young scamps as you have always been. Let them talk about their divinity. Above all, don't run her down. If they quarrel—let them.'

'Ah, how can you!' she exclaimed. 'Perhaps even while I am here they may be quarrelling—killing each other, perhaps. I ought not to have come out. I must go back at once.'

'Then let me go with you,' he said. 'If there is any nonsense of that kind going on, I shall soon put a stop to it.'

And so Delia, looking out of her bedroom window, saw her husband and her friend walking quickly

down the avenue in the shimmering moonlight. And all the old bitterness came back to her.

* * * * *

Meanwhile, Ronald was being generously made a fool of by the vain, thoughtless young mistress of Crane Hall. He was really a very good-looking boy, and not devoid of ideas. She was not at all sure which of the brothers interested her most. Sometimes she preferred George, sometimes Ronald. To-night it was Ronald.

Dinner was a thing of the past, and they were sitting in the palm-house that opened out of the smaller drawing-room. Minx wore a wonderful tea-gown of a curiously vivid blue, that showed up her hair and eyes rather well.

'You absurd boy,' she said, meeting his adoring gaze with a smile that just showed her pretty teeth, 'how you do look at me! You make me feel quite shy.'

'I can't help looking at you,' he answered in a low voice. 'You look like a picture—like the sort of pictures one dreams of.'

She wrinkled up her smooth forehead with a queer little grimace that included her lips and nose.

'You mean I look like a nightmare,' she said gravely. 'How unkind!'

'Oh, Mrs. Dunstable! how could you think—but you know very well what I mean. You know I think you are the most beautiful woman I ever

saw. I—I simply worship you,' went on the infatuated boy.

'But that's naughty, you know,' she said, dimpling again. 'You mustn't worship married women. At least, you mustn't tell them so. What would mamma say?'

'She would know I couldn't help it,' he answered simply. 'Motherkin always understands.'

'Does she really? What a wonderful person,' said Minx, with dancing eyes.

'I say,' went on Ronald, bringing his chair a little nearer to her, 'I wish you weren't married.'

'Do you?' she answered, as she waved her fan lazily to and fro. 'Well, sometimes I'm not sure that I don't wish it myself.'

'What!—isn't he kind to you?' the lad exclaimed, flushing darkly.

'Oh yes, Peter's all right, bless him. But it's best to be free.'

'Do you know why I wish you weren't married?' he said, becoming bolder.

She laughed; then grew preternaturally solemn.

'Perhaps you would like to marry me yourself, dear child?' she said, turning great grave eyes on his.

'I would marry you to-morrow!' he said wildly.

'You would?' was the calm rejoinder. 'And what about me? Do you think yourself so very irresistible? No, I can't let you kiss my hand. As I told your brother this afternoon, it is a silly

medieval custom that doesn't appeal to me. Kissing of any kind is a relic of barbarism.'

'Has George ever attempted to kiss your hand?' the boy asked, turning somewhat pale.

'My dear Ronald,' was the nonchalant answer, 'George is like his brother, not at all backward in coming forward, as they say in the north. And you are both very up-to-date young men, and do great credit to your bringing up. But it is late, and time you were home, and in your little bed.'

'Give me that rose you are wearing,' he said somewhat huskily.

'Certainly,' she answered, with a gay smile. 'It is rather withered, but perhaps you don't mind that. Good-night, you ridiculous boy.'

'I'm not such a boy,' was the half-sulky reply. 'I am twenty.'

'La, la, la!' she exclaimed laughing lightly. 'What a great age! But,' she added seriously, 'I should have thought you a good deal older.'

'Should you?' he said, drawing himself up with a gratified air. 'I feel a lot older, I can tell you.'

For it is strange that youth loves playing at age, even as age loves playing at youth.

She went to the door to see him mount his bicycle, and blew a kiss to him as he turned half-way down the avenue to wave his cap.

Then she took a few turns up and down the terrace in the moonlight, and flung her pretty arms above her head with a yawn.

'What foolish boys they are, these two mother's darlings,' she murmured, as she lit a cigarette. 'And how Madame Mother hates me, ever since she brought her cubs here, and found they had lost their hearts to me. And yet, she ought to be thankful to me for licking them into shape a bit, before they go forth into the wicked wide world.'

Suddenly she raised her head, and seemed to be listening intently. And as she listened, the beat of a motor broke the stillness. It grew louder and nearer; and presently a heavy car came into view, far down the avenue.

'Why, it's Peter!' she exclaimed under her breath. 'And how curious—I believe I'm glad!'

A few seconds later the car same to a stand; and Peter, enveloped in an enormous overcoat, and all the other paraphernalia of the long-journey motorist, jumped out, and ran up the steps.

'Hallo, Minx, old girl,' he said cheerfully. 'Didn't expect me, eh?'

'No, I didn't,' she answered. 'At least, I had no special reason for expecting you.'

'Wasn't sure myself until I started,' he went on, unwinding a silk scarf from his throat as he spoke. 'Thought I'd like to surprise you, besides.'

'You never surprise me,' she replied carelessly. 'If you'd come a little sooner, you would have found me being made love to by one of the Edgecombe children.'

Peter made no remark, only disembarrassed him-

self of the rest of his wraps, and followed his wife into the room he called his study.

Here a cheery fire was burning, and a table was laid with sandwiches and other light eatables, decanters, and a syphon.

For the comings and goings of the master of Crane Hall were erratic, and things were always in readiness for him, lest he should return in the small hours, cold and in need of refreshment.

When he had glanced at his letters, and helped himself to a mild whisky and soda and a sandwich, he said, in answer to Minx's last speech :

'Why can't you let these boys alone? You'll set them by the ears in the end, like the rest of the procession, and then that ripping little mother of theirs will get mad.'

'Why, Peter, how funny. Are you jealous?' she said, perching herself on the arm of the sofa, and looking at him between half-shut eyelids.

'No, I'm not. Not a cent,' he answered coolly. 'I don't mind you making fools of fellows, if you find it livening. But these lads are only kiddies. Sort of chaps you read about, that have never had a thought they couldn't tell their mothers or their aunts.'

'Are there chaps like that?' purred Minx. 'Awfully curious conversations they must have with their mothers and aunts at times, mustn't they?'

'Ah, very likely,' rejoined her husband drily. 'Anyway, I haven't figured on having little Mrs.

Edgecombe left lonesome while you bustle around with her chicks. There are heaps of other chaps, good and plenty, if you must play about. What's the matter with Dinwoodie, for instance, as a sample?'

'Oh, Dinwoodie is bound hand and foot to Mrs. Edgecombe's chariot,' she said, shrugging her shoulders. 'I thought it was Delia Carstairs, at first. But it seems it isn't. Fancy being in love with the mother of two grown-up sons.'

'Oh, I don't know. She's a mighty taking little piece; and doesn't look more than thirty—if that. If I hadn't met you, I should probably have had a try for her myself. Not that I suppose she'd have looked at me, though.'

'Good gracious, Peter, you are not serious?' was the amazed and indignant answer.

He laughed as he lit a cigarette.

'You wouldn't care, you know,' he said nonchalantly, 'suppose I told you I'd lost a considerable bit of my heart to her.'

'Yes, I should. I—I never thought for a moment you would ever dream of caring for any woman except me. I think it is perfectly horrid of you to hint such things, and most unkind.'

And the speaker descended from her perch on the arm of the sofa, and subsided with great dignity into a chair.

Peter went on smoking with apparent dreamy enjoyment.

'I see,' he murmured. 'I'm to have all the

kicks, and you're to have all the dimes. Good business!'

His wife looked at him with incredulous resentful eyes. She suddenly remembered that he had not kissed her when he came in. And that his general bearing was that of serene indifference.

It was not possible that he was growing tired of her? The thought sent a queer shiver of apprehension through her butterfly heart.

'Peter,' she said uncertainly—'what's the matter with you?'

'The matter with me?' he repeated. 'Nothing that I know of. I'm all right. By the way, old girl, that dress doesn't suit you. It's a trifle too blinding. Makes you look—just a bit faded.'

Minx literally gasped.

Was this calm, judicial critic *Peter*—Peter, whom she had likened to a doormat?—Peter, who had worshipped the ground she walked on, petted her, spoiled her, adored her?

'*Faded!*' she echoed weakly.

'That's so,' he said, stifling a yawn.

Minx felt very much as if she had suddenly received a slap in the face. She rose from her chair, absolutely white with anger.

Peter yawned again—cavernously.

'Sorry,' he said. 'Been humping around all day, and am just dead beat.'

His wife, her head held very high, sailed out of the room, and shut the door violently behind her.

Peter helped himself to another whisky and soda and went into a silent fit of laughter.

'Dear little woman!' he murmured, as he lit a cigarette. 'She's just riled. I do feel a bit like a cheap skate. But it had to be done. Our honeymoon's over, and I've got to pick up the reins again. Peter V. Dunstable's not going to be kicked along the pike. No—not by the best and trickiest woman in the universe. And it was getting a bit that way, a considerable bit that way, Peter V.'

Chapter XX

MEANWHILE, Ronald Edgecombe, descending from his bicycle at the door of Rowan Cottage, chanced to come face to face with his brother, who was just letting himself in with his latchkey.

'Hallo, is it you?' was the younger brother's brilliant remark, as he lifted his 'wheel' into the hall.

'Yes. Who did you expect it was?' replied the other with equal brilliancy.

'Well, you needn't lose your temper,' said Ronald, as they turned into the little sanctum where, at various successive periods of their existence, they had learned lessons, received scoldings and other more realistic forms of punishment, and read for various 'exams.'

'Lose my temper, you young ass! Why should I?' was the haughty rejoinder. 'You're suffering from swelled head, I'm afraid. Not accustomed to being asked out to dinner all by yourself. Been punishing the champagne, too, I fancy.'

There was just enough truth in this last remark to rouse Ronald to fury.

'Don't make an infernal idiot of yourself,' he

exclaimed violently. 'You're mad because you weren't asked, I suppose. But you seem to forget that a woman may have matters to discuss with a——a friend, that could not be so well discussed in the presence of a third party.'

George burst into scornful laughter. But his laughter ceased suddenly.

'Where did you get that rose?' he asked in a low, suppressed voice.

'My hostess gave it to me,' was the ineffably lofty answer.

'I don't believe it,' said George deliberately.

Ronald's face grew white.

'How dare you imply that I am a liar!' he exclaimed with a fierce gesture. 'I'll punch your head for you in another minute.'

'How dare I? Ha, ha! That's distinctly good,' jeered George. 'And so you'll punch my head, will you? You're a bit off your chump to-night, my young fighting-cock. Can't you see that Mrs. Dunstable can't be bothered with you, and is only civil to you because you are *my* brother?'

'*What!*' shouted Ronald, losing all control over himself. 'I like that! Why, she said to-night that you bored her to death with your clumsy compliments and quotations, and——'

'*That's* a lie, and you know it,' exclaimed the other, shaking with passion.

The answer to this was a swift blow on the speaker's mouth from Ronald's fist.

And then those two lads, who had never had a quarrel to speak of since their babyhood, fell upon one another like wild beasts, and a regular fight began.

So oblivious were they of everything except their fury against one another that they did not hear the door open to admit their mother and Carstairs.

In a moment the latter had them apart, and held them firmly, a hand on each struggling young shoulder.

Berenice flung herself upon George—of the two, he was her favourite.

'George!' she cried breathlessly. 'George—oh, George!'

'You ought to be ashamed of yourselves!' exclaimed Carstairs sternly. 'What on earth has happened?'

The combatants stood panting, and glaring at one another with frenzied eyes.

'He insulted me!' shouted Ronald. 'He called me a liar. If he was my brother fifty times over, I'd thrash any man who called me a liar. Let me go, Mr. Carstairs. I don't see what it has got to do with you,' he added fiercely.

Meanwhile George had disengaged himself from his mother's clinging arms, and placed her in a chair. He was feeling rather ashamed of himself by this time. But, naturally, he did not feel inclined to admit as much.

'Ronald has been making an ass of himself,'

he said shortly. 'And I lost my temper, I suppose. It's nothing to cry about, mother.'

Then Berenice, being a woman, and jealous, and excited besides, did—or rather said—a very unwise thing.

'It is all about that wicked, dangerous woman at Crane Hall,' she sobbed. 'I wish they had never seen her. I wish she was dead. She is not fit for respectable women to know.'

George's face turned very white.

'You have no right to say that, mother,' he said in a voice that made her wince as if he had struck her. 'The lady you speak of is as good and as pure as you are. It is cruel and unwomanly to speak of her as you have just done. I shall never forgive you.'

Then turning to Carstairs, he said coldly:

'Good-night, sir. I hope, as you are here, you will try to explain to my mother that it is not the best way to keep a son's love and respect—to make unwarrantable accusations against one of the best little women on God's earth, simply because men can't help loving and being sorry for the poor little soul, married to a fellow who thinks of nothing but speculation and money-grubbing. Fellows can't be tied to their mother's apron-strings all their lives. We're men, not children; and we've had enough of molly-coddling.'

'Well, anyway, you've no right to cheek the mother like that,' put in Ronald roughly. 'Though

it is playing it a bit low down, mother, to try to take away the character of a woman you ought to be proud to know, by Jove——'

'Oh,' burst out poor little Motherkin hysterically —' this is too much. I—I can't bear it.'

And she rushed like a whirlwind from the room. Which, all things considered, it would have been better if she had done sooner.

'Now look here, lads,' said Carstairs very seriously. 'I don't know what you have been quarrelling about —though I have a pretty fair idea. But what I want to say to you both is this. Whatever the cause of your difference may have been, do you think it's a nice or a gentlemanly thing to do, to fly at each other's throats like a couple of drunken coal-heavers, and terrify your mother out of her senses? I am exceedingly disappointed in you both. Nothing—no explanation—could excuse the shameful exhibition you have made of yourselves.'

Carstairs had known both the culprits intimately since they were in short frocks, therefore he did not mince matters. And the boys resented his sharp words less than they would have resented them from anyone else, probably.

But they listened sullenly, though silently. And black hatred smouldered in their hearts for one another. And yet—they had been loving comrades as well as brothers, for over twenty years.

So much for Mrs. Dunstable's 'innocent flirtations.' Possibly that young woman had meant no

harm in encouraging the attentions of first one and then the other of these young fellows. It had amused her, no doubt, to play the one off against the other, and laugh over their jealousy and devotion.

But—if you set a stone rolling down a hill, it does not always stop at the spot you indicate. And its ultimate destination is apt to be uncertain.

Carstairs looked at his watch. Then he said coldly:

'Before I go, I should like to have your promise that for to-night, at least, you will respect your mother's house, and refrain from turning it into a boxing-ring. Perhaps by the morning you may have cooled off a little, and may feel equal to making your mother the apology she certainly deserves.'

Ronald muttered some only half audible impertinence, and swung out of the room. Subsequently his bedroom door was heard to bang violently.

George was leaning his back against the mantelpiece, looking, it must be said, rather a sorry spectacle. His hair was disordered, his tie askew, his lip already beginning to swell up unbecomingly from the recent impact of his brother's knuckles. And yet he looked a manly lad enough, in spite of these disadvantages.

'I am quite willing to promise that there won't be any more rows to-night,' he said after a brief pause. 'I dare say it was my fault. I, being the elder, ought to have kept my temper. And I'm

sorry to have vexed my mother. Of course, I shall apologise to her.'

But in his tone there was none of the tender love and reverence that was wont to creep into his voice when he spoke of 'Motherkin.'

Minx had done even better than she knew. She had not only broken up the friendship between the brothers. But she had estranged their hearts from their mother as well.

Nevertheless, when Carstairs had gone, George went up to his mother's room, and tapped at the door.

'Who is there?' said a cold little voice.

'It's me—George,' was the grammarless reply.

'I cannot talk to you to-night,' said the voice, becoming more frigid still. 'I am tired and upset. You can say what you have to say in the morning. Good-night.'

George turned away frowning, and went to his own room.

It was late when Carstairs got home, and Delia had gone to bed. At least she had undressed, and was sitting over her bedroom fire, in her dressing-gown.

She did not turn her head when her husband came into the room, not even when he stooped and touched her unbound hair with his lips.

'Did you think I was lost?' he said, laying his hand on her shoulder, and speaking very gently.

An irresistible impulse of affection towards her

stirred him. And he felt somewhat remorseful too. For he was beginning to realise that perhaps the redoubtable Mrs. Dunstable might have had a potential finger in the pie of his domestic differences, as well as in those at Rowan Cottage. And if so, he felt he had been somewhat unjust and unreasonable.

'Did you think I was lost?' he repeated, as she did not answer.

She moved slightly away from him; not petulantly, but very determinedly.

'No,' she answered quietly. 'I thought it probable that you had found your conversation with Mrs. Edgecombe more interesting than you expected.'

It was the first time that any resentment towards Berenice had stirred her. But even now she felt less indignant with her than with Carstairs.

'My conversation was not so much with Mrs. Edgecombe as with her sons,' he said. 'Your friend, Mrs. Dunstable, has stirred up a veritable hornets' nest at Rowan Cottage.'

'Please don't betray any confidences,' she replied rather haughtily. 'I have no desire to pry into the affairs of people who don't take me into their confidence.'

'Now, my dear child, don't be difficult and unreasonable,' said Carstairs, looking worried and perplexed. 'Surely you cannot be out of temper because I went home with Mrs. Edgecombe?'

'Certainly not,' was the dignified answer—the effect, however, being somewhat marred by an unmistakable quaver in the voice of the speaker. 'I am not out of temper at all. I—I am only tired and sleepy.'

'No, you are not,' he said caressingly, drawing a chair near to hers. 'You are only cross. But you look such a sweet though cross little sprite with your hair all falling about your shoulders like that! What a pity you can't always wear it so.'

But Delia, with certain mischievous insinuations of Minx's fresh in her ears, only saw, in this attempt to conciliate her, a deceitful glossing over of her husband's feelings towards Berenice. And her wholesome nature was, for the time, embittered out of all knowledge of herself.

While Carstairs, for his part, thought his young wife shrank from his caresses, and therefore withdrew into his old armour of reserve.

She, foolish little thing, was longing to fling herself into his arms, and tell him how much she cared for him. And he was longing to gather her to his heart, and tell her how much she meant in his lonely life. But pride—that extraordinary quality which impels us to reject the good we desire when it is offered to us; the pride that, in vulgar parlance, insists on our cutting off our noses to spite our faces, held them apart with inexorable grip, and forbade the smallest concession on either side.

He had been about to suggest that she should go

down to the earthquake-shaken household at Rowan Cottage on the following day. But her cool aloofness absolutely negatived any idea of the kind. So he stiffened into a very fair imitation of indifference, and said after a brief silence:

'You are upset and out of sorts, I see. I am sorry to have bothered you. Good-night.'

He had risen; and as he spoke, she rose too.

'There is something I want to say to you,' she said, in a queer, hesitating voice, 'something I have wanted to say to you for some time.'

'Yes?' he said quietly.

'Donald'—she went on, making a desperate attempt to speak calmly. 'I—I want to go back to the aunts. I am not making you happy. And I—I am very miserable. Our marriage was a mistake. I have seen it for a long time.'

All the colour ebbed from his face, and he leaned somewhat heavily against the mantelpiece as he answered in a stern voice:

'You mean that it is your wish that we should—separate?'

She bent her head in silence.

He did not speak for a minute or so. Then he said icily:

'Very well. I dare say you are right. We are not suited to each other. I, too, have seen it—for some time.'

And without further speech he left her.

* * * * *

Next morning the master of the house breakfasted alone. For Lulu had a slight sore throat, and insisted that 'Mumsey' should share her morning meal, which was partaken of in bed. So Nan superintended Carstairs' breakfast arrangements, and tried to fill Delia's place as well as she could. But her quick young eyes saw that the old tired look had come back to her father's eyes; and she knew that something was wrong, and that the something was connected with her stepmother.

During the morning Delia moved and spoke like one in some terrible dream. Her heart ached with a dull heavy pain that was almost physical. She would have given worlds to recall her words of the previous night—the words that were about to banish her from all she loved. But the one glimpse she had had from her window of her husband's stern set face as he drove away, told her that what she had done was irrevocable.

Towards the afternoon she shut herself up in the morning-room, and tried to write a letter to the aunts, explaining that she was coming back to them.

It was rather a difficult letter to write, however.

Meanwhile Master Samuel Vansittart had made his way to the schoolroom. He did not make daily visits since the departure of the boys, but appeared occasionally, and constituted himself the champion and coadjutor in mischief of Lulu. The latter young lady was confined to the schoolroom for to-day, because of her throat, and for the same reason was

exempt from lessons. So Miss Bumpus and Nan toiled away in dual antagonism. Neither took much notice of the entrance of Sammy, who came and went much as he willed at Garrioch.

'I've dot a sore throat,' Lulu informed him in a hoarse but important whisper. 'I had to have breakfast in bed.'

'*I* never get breakfast in bed,' observed Samuel with an air of injury—'not if I've ever such a throat. She just gives me castor-oil—castor-oil stirred up with hot milk, so that little pale green bubbles float about. Ugh!'

And Sammy made a gesture indicative of imminent sea-sickness.

'Oh, doodness,' said Lulu with a shudder. 'I just wouldn't take it.'

'Wouldn't you though,' replied her friend darkly. 'I tried that once. But she kept it in the pantry till it was cold, and then made me take it before lunch.'

'Yours must be a horrid house,' was the scornful answer.

'I believe you,' Master Vansittart answered in gloomy acquiescence.

Then seeing that Miss Bumpus and Nan were absorbed in the map of South America, he added:

'Lets creep away quite quietly to Batty's room. She's been baking rock-cakes. I came in by the back way and saw them. She'll be sure to give us some.'

So Lulu disobediently went, followed by her satellite.

Batty received them cheerfully. Sammy was rather a favourite of hers; and he considered her (on baking days) not half bad.

When the young people were comfortably ensconced on the big, chintz-covered 'settle' by the cosy fire, with a plate of rock-cakes between them, Lulu said coaxingly. :

'Tell us stories, Batty dear. Tell us about father when he was a little boy. Tell about when you and him were crossing the long meadow, and the bull came.'

'Ah, that was a day!' Batty answered, shaking her head lugubriously. 'Never shall I forget it.'

Here the door opened and Nan came in.

'Lulu, you oughtn't to have come out of the schoolroom,' she said admonishingly.

But Lulu affected not to hear.

'Has Miss Bumpus gone, dearie?' said Batty, as she handed a rock-cake to the new-comer, and seated herself in a wicker-chair with her knitting. 'She does work you cruel hard. Your eyes are quite heavy-like.'

'Go on about the bull,' demanded Sammy impatiently.

'Well, my dears, Master Donald—the master, that is—was a bit of a thing in a white cambric frock and a crimson sash. And I had taken him out one summer afternoon to the far woods, and, like a

silly, took a short cut home through the long meadow. And whether it was the blessed child's sash, or my face—for I always did get the colour of a ripe tomato in a hot sun—I never shall know. But in a moment I heard a roar like the bulls of Bashan mentioned in the blessed Scriptures, and I ran like—like a cherubim. But my legs grew weaker and weaker, and my breath got shorter and shorter, and I could hear the spiteful beast pounding along behind me, coming nearer and nearer.'

Here the narrator paused, and Lulu gurgled with delight, as she always did at this point in the well-worn tale.

'Coming nearer and nearer,' resumed Batty, 'until every moment I expected to feel his horns catching me by the waist-belt or thereabouts, and tossing me and Master Donald like a cat does a mouse. I kept shrieking out, as well as I could for running, all the prayers and hymns I could think of. I kept repeating at the top of my voice, "Hark, the herald angels sing," and "When shepherds watch their flocks by night," and "What is the chief end of man," from the Holy Catechism. But the bull took no notice, no more than if he had been deaf. When all at once, as I'm a living Christian, I heard a crash and a roar—but different from the other roars. And when by the mercy of heaven I made a spring at the hedge and dropped Master Donald over, and hoisted myself after him, I took time to look behind me, and there, if that bull hadn't

been induced by Providence to put his foot in a rabbit-hole, and snapped his leg like a stick of candy. "And serve you right, you brute," I called over the hedge—being safe, you see—and I caught up Master Donald, and away I went. But they had to shoot that bull. And a good thing too. But the very sight of a cow to this day gives me the twitters.'

'I think you were a great silly,' said Sammy with his most stolid air. 'My Uncle Philip says there's no need of being afraid of a bull, if you just dodge him round and round a tree.'

'That's all very well, Master Sammy,' rejoined Batty. 'But dodging round trees with a well-grown young gentleman in your arms isn't child's play. And, in any case, it's a play a human being is likely to tire of sooner than a bull. For after all, two legs isn't equal to four, and never could be, in this world or the next. And many a fearsome nightmare I've had since, and always a bull in it.'

'Women are always afraid of bulls and cows, and even spiders and earwigs,' said Master Vansittart scornfully.

'And naturally, too,' maintained Batty. 'Anything with more than the ordinary amount of legs, which is two, is likely to terrify any self-respecting female. And no shame to them, either.'

Chapter XXI

DUSK was falling in the morning-room, and Delia's letter to the aunts was still unwritten. Many sheets of paper lay crumpled on the floor ; and one on the blotting-pad was torn across and across.

At last the scribe threw down her pen, and hid her face in her hands. And sitting thus, she did not hear the door open and shut, nor see that her husband had come into the room. Therefore she started violently when he spoke to her.

'Are you so unhappy, child ?' he said sadly.

She did not answer.

Carstairs stooped mechanically and picked up the spoiled sheets of paper that littered the floor, and laid them on the table.

Delia had risen, and stood nervous and trembling.

Her husband leaned against the mantelpiece, and for a time silence reigned in the firelit room.

At last he said in an odd, restrained voice :

'Did you mean what you said last night, Delia ? Do you really wish to leave me ?'

Still she did not speak ; and with a quick, impatient sigh he went on :

'Very well, child. Perhaps it is best so. I am a fool, I dare say. For of late I have allowed myself to hope that perhaps one day——'

He paused and pressed one hand somewhat wearily over his eyes.

'Yes?' Delia faltered, taking a step nearer to him, and regarding him half eagerly, half wistfully, 'that one day—what?'

'I was fool enough to think that one day we might become more to each other,' he answered shortly.

'But'—she said, under her breath—'do you want us to become more to each other? Oh, Don, why do you look at me like that? One would almost think you—you loved me!'

The last words were almost inaudible, but he heard them, and catching her hands in his, looked down at her with stern, miserable eyes.

'My God! is it only now that it has occurred to you that I love you?' he said fiercely. 'Did you never know it—never see it? You must have been blind indeed.'

'Don,' she whispered—'is it true? Are you *sure?*'

'Sure?' he echoed with a short laugh. 'One does not make mistakes in such matters.'

She had crept quite close to him. Her breath was coming fast, her eyes were shining.

'You love me!' she murmured, between sobs and happy laughter. 'You love me? And oh, Don, what about me? Did *you* never guess——'

Her eyes met his suddenly ; then fell.

He caught her to him, and pressed her head down on his breast.

'Delia,' he muttered hoarsely—'Delia !'

And with a queer little cry she stole one arm round his neck, and gave up her lips to his kisses.

When at last he released her, he said :

'And what about the letter to the aunts ?'

'Ah, Don, you need not smile. I was very, very miserable,' she answered, her lips trembling a little.

'And so was I,' he said, with the grave smile she loved. 'But we have changed all that.'

* * * * *

Three or four months later they were at Grünwald once more.

The weather was perfect, and the place was nearly empty. And Carstairs said that this was their real honeymoon.

One hot afternoon the same post brought Delia a letter from Minx, and Carstairs one from Dinwoodie.

'Oh, Don,' exclaimed Delia in an awestruck voice after a silence. 'Poor Minx is in such terrible trouble. Peter has been shockingly injured in a motor accident. The doctors say he will never be able to walk again. It seems so awful. Somehow, one can't imagine pain or grief coming to Minx. She seems broken-hearted. I never thought she cared for him so much.'

'Poor little soul—God help her,' said Carstairs compassionately.

They were sitting in the little wood on the southern slope of the hill, Delia leaning her back against the trunk of a sturdy pine, her husband stretched out lazily, with his hands clasped under his head, and his hat pulled over his eyes.

Presently he sat up, and lit a cigarette.

'Tender-hearted little girl,' he said caressingly, as he put an arm round her. 'Why, your eyes are full of tears.'

'I am so grieved for her,' she whispered, half-hiding her face on his sleeve. 'I am so happy—I can't bear to think of her misery—and his.'

'Yes, it's hard lines,' he answered, 'fearfully hard lines.'

'After a silence he went on :

'Dinwoodie has news too. But his news is good. He is going to marry Berenice.'

'Ah, I am very glad,' she exclaimed.

Then her eyes met his, and she blushed furiously.

'What a little goose I was,' she said, half-laughing, 'to be jealous of Berenice. For I was, you know.'

'I know,' he answered tranquilly. 'But I was equally jealous of Dinwoodie. So we can call quits.'

'And what about her boys ?' Delia asked, rubbing her face contentedly against her companion's arm.

'Oh, they are enthusiastic about Uncle Bill, and Australia generally. I think they are gradually recovering from the attack of "Minx-fever" that sent them there—from what Dinwoodie says.'

'I wonder if they will be happy,' said Delia dreamily, after another silence.

'You wonder if who will be happy? Berenice's boys?'

'No. Berenice and Mr. Dinwoodie. I wonder if they will be as happy as we are.'

'I do not think it is at all likely,' was the calm answer.

She looked up at him with sweet serious eyes.

'Oh, Don, why?'

'Could anyone be as happy as we are?' he asked as he kissed her. 'I doubt it.'

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